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# Negotiating Motherhood and Intersecting Inequalities: A Qualitative Study of African American Mothers and the Socialization of Adolescent Daughters

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# Negotiating Motherhood and Intersecting Inequalities: A Qualitative Study of African American Mothers and the Socialization of Adolescent Daughters

Brandyn-Dior McKinley, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2017

African American middle-class mothers have been understudied in gender and family studies research. To address this gap in the literature, this dissertation uses an intersectional framework to document the raced, classed, and gendered experiences of African American middle-class mothers raising adolescent daughters. Data collected from thirty-six interviews indicated that mothers try to reconcile cultural definitions of motherhood with their present-day social and economic realities. Due to persistent race and class segregation in the United States, mothers and their families spend a considerable amount of time in predominantly white settings. Because mothers do not assume their class status will shield their children from racial bias, mothers engaged in different types of care work to promote their daughters' educational, emotional, and social development. This included monitoring their daughters' school environments, helping their daughters develop resistance strategies to combat the effects of discrimination, and constructing culturally affirming support networks. Mothers also reported that a primary goal of their socialization was to instill in their daughters a sense of self worth. However, although mothers utilized messages of self-definition and empowerment, the need to challenge racial stereotypes led mothers to endorse social scripts of middle-class respectability that depend on the sexual modesty and gender conformity of African American women. Indeed, mothers' sexuality-related communications revealed broader concerns about their daughters' futures in a racialized society. Study findings offer insight into the interpersonal and contextual factors that

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influence the socialization strategies of African American middle-class mothers and can inform the development of culturally relevant family support programs.

Negotiating Motherhood and Intersecting Inequalities: A Qualitative Study of African  
American Mothers and the Socialization of Adolescent Daughters

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B.S., Cornell University, **2007**

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A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy

at the

University of Connecticut

2017

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2017

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Negotiating Motherhood and Intersecting Inequalities: A Qualitative Study of African  
American Mothers and the Socialization of Adolescent Daughters

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University of Connecticut  
2017

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

I initially embarked on this project due to the relative invisibility – both theoretically and empirically – of African American middle-class mothers within family and gender studies. Despite strides over the past two decades to explore the socioeconomic diversity of Black American families (Murry, 1996), most family science research on African American mothers investigates the parenting approaches of lower-income African American women living in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. At the same time, feminist sociological studies that examine the influence of hegemonic mothering ideologies on U.S. women’s work and family decisions tend to draw from the experiences of middle-class white mothers (Dow, 2016a). As a consequence, until recently, there was little known about the perspectives, activities, and social realities of African American middle-class mothers. The aim of this study, then, is to provide an expanded view of contemporary motherhood and African American families.

The everyday experiences of African American middle-class mothers are shaped by the societal position of middle-class Black Americans and social practice of “straddling two worlds” (Cole & Omari, 2003, p. 790). Typically, members of the Black middle class engage in daily negotiations of their racial identities within mainstream institutions, while also maintaining their connections to the Black community. Karyn Lacy (2007) has argued that middle-class Black Americans occupy an ambiguous place within the U.S. racial hierarchy. Race separates middle-class Black Americans from middle-class White Americans. But class status and attainment creates social and spatial distance between middle-class Black Americans and their lower-income Black American counterparts. Indeed, when the “two worlds” conceptual framework is applied in a way

that considers racial boundaries without sufficient attention paid to the class structure of U.S. Black communities, African American middle-class mothers and their families are rendered invisible.

For quite some time, there was a tacit assumption that as middle-class parents, African American middle-class mothers would simply assimilate to the dominant ideologies and practices of middle-class White American mothers. However, the narrative accounts from participants in this study reveal a far more nuanced reality. Based on the data I collected from thirty-six in-depth interviews with middle-class African American mothers, I argue that African American middle-class mothers are creating and negotiating a separate ideological and social space which is both connected to and apart from middle-class White American mothers and lower-income Black American mothers. Within this particular milieu, mothers are incorporating and testing parenting approaches that address institutional and interpersonal racism and its intersections with class and gender. Specifically, the strategies that mothers enact are informed by their keen awareness of structural racism and the economic precarity of middle-class African Americans, as well as the overall position of African American children within a society that sees them as less innocent and more adult than White American children (Bernstein, 2011; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; Goff et al., 2014). To this end, the current study provides an examination of African American middle-class mothers' socialization practices.

Preparing children for racial bias, teaching children about African American cultural traditions, and cultivating a positive self-image represent core elements of family racial socialization (Lesane-Brown, 2006). Previous studies indicate that early on parents

may take an active role in managing and monitoring their children's environments in order to protect them from racial harm (Dow, 2016b; Uttal, 1998). However, as children age and become more autonomous, parents are not able to shield their children from the racist attitudes and behaviors of their peers and adults. Instead, eventually children must learn to overcome race-related challenges on their own. Even so, the emphasis on racial and class identities in the academic literature on middle-class Black American families to the exclusion of other social identities has resulted in an incomplete view of what middle-class African American parents, and in this case mothers, actually do to socialize their children for entry into adulthood. In order to further illuminate the contemporary socialization practices of African American middle-class mothers, I chose to interview mothers with adolescent daughters between the ages of 12 and 21.

Past research suggests that African American women's parenting of daughters offers an important microsocial context in which to examine the ideologies and practices of African American mothers (Kaplan, 1996). In particular, Black feminist maternal theory posits that the study of African American motherhood is integral to understanding how African American girls are socialized. As April Few (1999) explains,

Daughters learn survival strategies first and foremost from their mothers. Mothers and daughters can interchangeably serve as lifelines to one another when they feel overwhelmed by societal and interpersonal factors. Othermothers<sup>1</sup> and community mothers also share the responsibility of mothering in their communities and provide daughters with more strategies for resistance and models of Black motherhood (p. 71).

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Hill Collins (2007a) describes othermothers as women who assist biological mothers with the care of their children. Othermothers can be grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins, and "often play central roles in diffusing the emotional intensity" (p. 285) of mother-daughter relationships.

In this way, daughters are participants in the women-centered networks that have been central in African American women's lives. African American girls learn about the meaning of African American womanhood via observations of their mothers and other African American women in their families and communities. As part of this process, African American mothers teach their daughters how to succeed within dominant social structures while also encouraging them to challenge the status quo. Raising daughters, then, often requires that mothers provide lessons – through their words and deeds - in conformity and resistance. That is, mothers must find ways to communicate the realities of race and gender inequality without undermining their daughter's aspirations. This involves a measured approach that is characterized by a delicate balance of candor and reassurance.

To my knowledge, as of the writing of this dissertation thesis, there was no research that specifically examined the mothering strategies of middle-class African American mothers raising adolescent daughters. As such, this research sought to understand how mothers prepare daughters to address issues of race and its intersections with class and gender. Moreover, by exploring the experiences of mothers with adolescent children, I am able to show how mothers' socialization practices evolve over time. Indeed, my findings document the behind-the-scenes care work<sup>2</sup> involved in the intergenerational transfer of resistance strategies from mothers to their daughters. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has suggested that because African American women face race and gender barriers "from one generation to the next, U.S. Black women have a vested interest in opposing oppression" (p. 274). Thus, for many of the mothers in this study,

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<sup>2</sup> Sinikka Elliott and Elyshia Aseltine (2012) define parental carework as "the work of parenting, including the provision of care, nurturance, guidance, and protection" (p. 720).

nurturing their daughter's social consciousness was a critical component of their socialization practices as daughters became more developmentally and socially independent of their mother's influence, advocacy, and protection.

I also found that the immediate social environment in which respondents engaged in mothering shaped the concerns, motivations, and socialization strategies mothers used with their daughters. In general, the history of racial stratification in the United States has created a set of racial realities and stressors that influence the daily lives of most Black Americans. But for middle-class African American families residing in predominantly white communities the intransigence of racial stereotypes can seem inescapable. As a result, raising children within majority-white social contexts requires unique maneuvers by mothers in order to instill self-confidence and support their daughter's identity development as middle-class African American female adolescents.

### **Organization of Dissertation Chapters**

In the following chapters, I illustrate in greater detail the various tensions confronted by African American middle-class mothers. In so doing, this study draws on Black feminist perspectives and intersectionality as conceptual tools to frame the experiences and socialization practices of African American middle-class mothers (Few, 2007; Few-Demo, 2014). Chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant theories and literature that informed the present study. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used to execute this dissertation project. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 comprise the results section of the thesis.

In Chapter 4, I focus on how African American middle-class mothers negotiate cultural definitions of motherhood. Specifically, I validate recent findings by other

scholars who have argued that middle-class African American mothers evaluate themselves based on mothering ideologies and expectations that emerge from within their racial-ethnic communities (Barnes, 2016; Dow, 2016a). Even so, consistent with previous research, mothers' current social and economic positions affect their adherence to and implementation of these ideologies. In addition, as part of my analysis, I show how mothers' work and family decisions are influenced by mothers' efforts to protect their children from racism and cultivate a black racial community and black middle-class experience that reinforces the cultural socialization that mothers and their spouses provide within their homes. In Chapter 5, I address educational institutions as a particularly contentious terrain for African American middle-class mothers and their families. It is within this institutional setting that mothers' influence and advocacy is most visible. Despite their upward social mobility, mothers often contend with pervasive racial and gender stereotypes that cast African American students as underachievers and their mothers as undereducated and disengaged. In turn, mothers not only activate their class resources to achieve favorable educational results for their daughters (and other children), but they also engage specific class markers to signal their membership in the middle- and upper-middle classes of modern American society.

Significantly, the lessons that mothers provide to their daughters about how to overcome the obstacles they may face in schools are linked to broader socialization messages about what it means to be an African American woman in America. This is the subject of Chapter 6. In Chapter 6, I discuss the strategies that mothers use to counter dominant social narratives about African American womanhood and the potentially detrimental effects of class-specific racialized gender ideologies that restrict the personal

agency of African American girls and women. To this end, in Chapter 7, I explore mothers' approaches to their daughters' emerging sexuality, as sexuality continues to be a fraught topic for African American women whose sexual lives have been used, on the one hand, to propagate racist myths about African American men and women, and on the other hand, "to maintain the subordination of women as a whole" (Rose, 2003, p. 5). In fact, I argue that mothers' sexuality-related communications reveal broader concerns about their daughters' futures in a racialized society.

Chapter 8 offers a summary and synthesis of the chapter findings, discussion of study implications, and recommendations for future research. Throughout this dissertation thesis, I document mothers' engagement in different types of care work that are labor intensive and require significant vigilance as mothers' daughters transitioned from childhood to adolescence and later into adulthood. In the end, mothers' accounts elucidate the challenges and opportunities that shape African American middle-class motherhood and the numerous strategies mothers devise in order to achieve positive outcomes for themselves and their families.



## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

Scholars from multiple disciplines have been involved in theory development and research on Black American families. I draw on scholarship from human development, family science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, gender studies, and African American studies in order to situate the present study within extant bodies of literature on African American women and their families. Consistent with prior scholarship, this review does not exclusively consider research that examines the effects of maternal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors on child development outcomes (Arendell, 2000). Rather, I highlight scholarly work that uses a “mother-as-subject” approach to explore the meaning motherhood has for American women (Apple & Golden, 1997). As Ellen Ross (1995) points out, “[l]ooking at mothers as ‘subjects’ means learning about the details of their daily material work” (p. 398), and in turn, compels researchers to ask different questions about mothering and motherhood, including an examination of the diverse social contexts in which women and mothers care for children.

The present study is also grounded in feminist family studies research that illuminates “the myriad ways in which...broader social currents, prevailing power relations, and dominant ideologies” of gender and family shape “intimate family interactions,” as well as the strategies that mothers and their partners use to manage daily family life (Fox & Murry, 2000, p.1168). To this end, I begin with a review of research that examines how women in the United States contend with “contemporary constructions of ‘good mothering’ and motherhood” (Miller, 2007, p. 338). In particular, I focus on scholarship that explores the lived experiences of African American mothers. I also discuss recent studies that consider the influence of race, class, and gender on

African American family socialization practices. I then conclude with a description of the theoretical perspectives that informed the development of this dissertation research project.

## **Maternal Theories and Studies of Contemporary Motherhood**

### **Feminist Analyses of Hegemonic Motherhood**

Feminist social theorists discuss motherhood as both a personal-familial experience and social institution (Brush, 1996). For many women who become mothers, motherhood is a source of fulfillment, identity, and agency (Benjamin, 1994; Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Ribbens, 1994; Rich, 1977; Ruddick, 1994). At the same time, motherhood has been conceptualized as an institution that “has limited women’s autonomy and ability to participate in activities that enhance their personal development and their social and economic status” (Baber & Allen, 1992, p. 102). In this way, “women’s mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance (Chodorow, 1978, p. 9). For example, dominant motherhood ideals that emerged during the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, relied on a social construction of gender that promoted the structural and ideological separation of men’s productive labor outside the home, and women’s reproductive labor within the domestic sphere (Polatnick, 1996; Shaw, 1997; Wilkie, 2003). Health professionals and clergy further reinforced the “separate spheres” gender ideology by arguing that children’s proper development required maternal protection from the ‘corrupting influences’ (Abramovitz, 1996, p. 117) of the outside world (Apple, 1997; Ladd-Taylor, 1997; Lewis, 1997). Mothers’ confinement to the home, then, not only served to preserve male dominance in the public

sphere, but also supported the institutionalization of mothering ideologies that made childrearing incompatible with paid work.

In her study of contemporary motherhood, Sharon Hays (1996) argued that ‘intensive mothering’ – with its roots in the ‘dominant cultural imagery’ (Walzer, 1997) of separate spheres - has become the prevailing mothering ideology in the United States. According to Hays, ‘intensive mothering’ is a social script that constructs motherhood as an exclusive “child-centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” endeavor (Hays, 1996, p. 69). Ironically, “[i]ntensive mothering...evolved as a dominant cultural model for [white] women in western middle-class families, even as these same women struggle with cultural models of gender equity, rationality, detachment, self-interest, and power” (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p. 267). Given that the U.S. labor force participation rate for women with children under age 18 is 70% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), one way that employed mothers attempt to accommodate the cultural expectations of ‘intensive mothering’ is to try to minimize the impact of their paid employment on their family activities (DeMeis & Perkins, 1996; Dillaway & Paré, 2008; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Myers-Walls, 1984).

Employed mothers have developed and implemented a wide array of domestic strategies to manage their work and family obligations (Hochschild, 1989). Based on interviews and observations of a racially and ethnically diverse group of female hospital workers, Anita Garey (1995) found that women altered their work schedules to conceal their employment including decisions to work part-time or at night. Garey (1999) referred to this phenomenon as “weaving motherhood” and suggested that “[w]orking the night shift...[was] an attempt to reconcile both the structural and conceptual incompatibilities

of being a ‘working mother’” (Garey, 1995, p. 417). In other words, for the mothers in Garey’s study, working the night shift was a symbolic action that communicated to others that despite their work outside the home, they still were “traditional” mothers who were available to their children during the day.

Whereas Garey’s study sample included women from a variety of racial-ethnic and class backgrounds, a separate line of research has focused on middle-class and upper-middle-class white professional women in dual-career marriages (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerson, 1985). Feminist studies on this specific group of married professional women demonstrate that class position, occupational status, and racial-ethnic identity influence the strategies that mothers use “to actualize or represent [the] norms” (Garey, 1995, p. 417) associated with intensive motherhood. Some women in elite professions “opt out” (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008) and exit the workforce to become full-time mothers based on their adherence to a “new traditionalism,” which views “own-mother care as irreplaceable in...children’s lives” (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004, p. 67). For other women, the decision to stay home is the result of work-related issues. In contrast, when mothers remain employed in professional careers, many “working mothers negotiate a compromise between demanding careers and their desire to provide the best possible care for their children by hiring a mother-surrogate to take their place during the working day” (Macdonald, 1998, p. 31).

Indeed, in an era where women are encouraged to climb the corporate ladder, having a nanny or au pair is one way to combine work and motherhood (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). As a result, scholars have identified the different ways that mothers in professional careers manage the intensive motherhood mandate (Hochschild, 2001;

McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008; Uttal, 1996). Cameron Macdonald (1998) found that some employed mothers – at times in collaboration with their in-home caregivers - develop elaborate family rituals to render the mothering work of nannies and au pairs invisible in “the service of an ‘image’ of the self-sufficient nuclear family” (p. 49). Other employed mothers reframe “good mothering as being in charge” of their households through the delegation of caregiving tasks to others (Christopher, 2012, p. 91). However, such a strategy often has meant that white, class-privileged mothers often rely on the domestic labor of less privileged women (i.e., poor women, women of color, and immigrant women) (Glenn, 1992; Romero, 2003). Far from dismantling the gendered division of labor, class privileged women devise strategies that allow them to work within the borders of a patriarchal system. Meanwhile, less privileged women must develop their own strategies for negotiating work and motherhood. Thus, although Hays (1996) identified ‘intensive mothering’ as the dominant ideology in the United States, scholars have identified competing mothering ideologies that have emerged alongside hegemonic ideologies to account for the material realities of marginalized women and their families (Christopher, 2013; Litt, 2000).

What the above studies on contemporary motherhood have in common is an emphasis on how different classes and cultures of mothers navigate and sometimes reject dominant conceptions of “good mothering” (Blair-Loy, 2003; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). But as Rose Brewer (1993), Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Bonnie Thornton Dill (1980, 1988) have argued, women’s experiences of motherhood cannot be understood separate from the particular social location from which mothers engage in reproductive and productive labor. For women of color, the subjective experience of mothering and

motherhood is tied to the quest for racial and economic justice. Racial and class inequality influences the domestic strategies women of color use to maintain their families (DeVault, 1999; Jarrett & Stephenson, 2003).

In the case of African American women, Sharon Harley (1997) suggests, “the dichotomous categories of male versus female, subordinate versus dominant were inconsistent with both the lived experiences and cultural ethos of mutuality of Black people in slavery and in the post-emancipation United States” (p. 30). During slavery, and following the Civil War and throughout the Reconstruction period, African American women labored alongside African American men (Roberts, 1993; Jones, 2010). At a time when white middle-class women were expected to conform to a family ideology of domesticity African American women were defined based on their role as laborers, not as mothers. African American women were excluded structurally and conceptually from idealized norms of white middle-class motherhood. As such, African American women nurtured their own self-definitions of motherhood that differed from hegemonic ideologies and resisted negative evaluations of African American women and their families.

### **Conceptual Frameworks of African American Motherhood**

Patricia Hill Collins’ work (2000, 2007a, 2007b) is ubiquitous in theoretical formulations of African American motherhood. According to Collins, when using African American women’s family lives as a starting point from which to theorize about motherhood, three themes emerge: survival, power, and identity (see also James, 1993; McLaurin-Allen, 1990; Mullings, 1997). In particular, African American women’s mothering practices have been influenced by their struggles against the “dangers,

indignities, and vagaries of poverty, racism, and sexism” (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015, p. 16; see also Boyd-Franklin, 2003; hooks, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). Moreover, African American women’s labor force participation has been vital in buffering the effects of inequality on the physical survival and reproduction of African American families (Barnes, 2016; Coleman, Antonucci, Adelman, & Crohan, 1987). Rather than accepting society’s views of paid work outside the home as deviant behavior, African American women fashioned a competing ideology of womanhood – one in which work was considered an integral part of motherhood (Christopher, 2013; Hertz & Ferguson, 1996; Landry, 2000). This does not mean, however, that African American women experience no difficulties in managing their work and family identities (McLoyd, 1993). Instead, it appears that challenges in negotiating work and family responsibilities (traditionally conceptualized as work-family conflict issues in the academic literature) often are managed by activating women-centered kin networks.

Historical analyses of African American families suggest that the communal features of African American motherhood may reflect West African cultural patterns in which extended kin relationships were highly valued (Mullings, 1997; Rodgers-Rose, 1990). According to this view, “reliance on maternal kin...was retained throughout American slavery because fathers, mothers, and children were frequently sold away from each other, leaving nonkin women to care for children whose parents had been sold away” (Barnes, 2016, p. 4). After emancipation, when employment discrimination against African American men required African American women to work outside the home, nonkin women (or othermothers) stepped in once again to care for children (Mullings, 2005).

In-depth interviews with poor and working-class single mothers suggest that many contemporary African American women believe that exclusive mothering is impractical. Mothers value the parenting provided by grandmothers, aunts, nieces, female cousins, and friends (Aschenbrenner, 1978; Jarrett, 1994; Pinderhughes & Harden, 2005). As one mother stated in a study by Blum and Deussen (1996), “My sister watches my son now...She’s the kind of person, she gets along with young kids, she thrives on it. My patience is not as good as hers” (p. 207). Ethnographic studies have documented the ways in which resources are redistributed throughout a network of kin and non-relatives (e.g., fictive kin). However, even though this constant flow of resources has been vital to the survival of poor African American families, the movement of scarce resources throughout a network of kin often precludes the ability of “any one person, family, or household acquiring a surplus” (Stack, 1974, p. 39). In other words, network ties may ensure survival but not upward social mobility. Indeed, low-income African American mothers whose social networks include middle-class members are best able to activate supports that provide opportunities for their advancement (Domínguez & Watkins, 2000).

Of note, the importance of community mothering to African American women extends beyond the tangible supports it provides mothers as they combine work and family responsibilities. Lawson (1999) explains,

Community mothering was and is a central experience in the lives of many Black women...participation in mothering is a form of emotional and spiritual expression in societies that marginalize Black women. ...Inaccessibility to mainstream institutions of power means that Black women exercise influence and exert power in their everyday lived realities...Black women use their power in the home, in the church, and in other community-based institutions to foster self-reliance and self-confidence in children (p. 27).



In this way, motherhood serves as a site of empowerment for African American women (Crowley & Curenton, 2011; Hale, 1980).

Given the many obstacles that African American women navigate in their daily lives, African American mothers tend to be revered for their ability to raise children and support their communities despite persistent discrimination. However, Shirley Hill (2005) cautions against overreliance on this archetype of African American motherhood because it can lead to essentialist notions of African American women as possessing “an innate capacity for mothering work” that is experienced as “natural and intrinsically gratifying” (p. 123). That is, while themes of strength and independence may resonate with many African American women, African American women are not impervious to the physical and psychological costs of social inequality (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2009; Ghasemi & Hajizadeh, 2012; Mullings, 2005). Expectations of self-sacrifice may also restrict African American women’s ability to pursue opportunities for their personal social and economic advancement (Nievar & Luster, 2006; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Wells-Wilbon & Simpson, 2009). Of equal concern to Black feminist scholars and activists is the extent to which the image of the “strong Black woman” sustains a social structure in which individual African American women are called upon to find private solutions to structural problems (Barnes, 2016).

In general, when scholars examine the experiences and activities of African American mothers and their families, they usually “begin with the fact that...women of color are disproportionately represented in the lowest economic groups and in occupations with the poorest pay” (Barnes, 2016, p. 16). In fact, “even the multiracial feminist perspective sometimes tacitly assumes that class (along with race and gender) is

one of the ‘jeopardies’ faced by Black women” (Hill, 2002, p. 504). Consequently, until very recently, much of our theoretical and empirical knowledge about African American motherhood has been based on scholarly work that excluded middle-class African American mothers. Furthermore, because African American married professional women, on average, remain in their careers it is often assumed that class status is irrelevant to African American women’s conceptions and experiences of motherhood. Put another way, racial identity is thought to supersede social class. Yet the reality is far more complex.

### **African American Middle-Class Motherhood**

The work and family decisions of African American middle-class mothers do not occur in an ecological vacuum. Instead, these decisions are intertwined with broader historical, social, and economic processes that place constraints on the freedom African American women and their families have had to implement alternative work and family strategies. Historically, and presently, African Americans “have struggled not only for upward mobility measured in material terms, but also for freedom from restrictions imposed by the wider society based on race” (Cole & Omari, 2003, p. 788). The institutionalization of racism and sexism in a capitalist society has meant that only a small percentage of African American families have been middle class for multiple generations (Collins, 2005; Darity, Jr., & Nicholson, 2005; Glenn, 1999). As a result, African American families face unique challenges in securing middle class status across generations (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009).

The African American middle class experienced substantial growth in the 1960s with the passage of landmark civil rights legislation. Between 1960 and 1970 the African

American middle class population doubled (Landry, 1987 as cited in Cole & Omari, 2003, p. 787) and African Americans in white-collar positions increased by 80% (Collins, 1997 as cited in Hill, 2002, p. 495). At the same time, some economically secure African Americans (e.g., business owners) “were positioned to take advantage of the economic opportunities created by the civil rights movement” (Collins, 2005, p. 77) because “their families had been middle-class for generations, had participated in Black community politics, and had functioned as a Black bourgeoisie or leadership class” (Collins, 2005, p. 77). In contrast, the vast majority of African Americans gained entry into the middle class through education and increased access to middle- and upper-income occupations. Significantly, this social mobility path typically required “the protections provided by strong antidiscrimination and affirmative action programs in education and employment” (Collins, 2005, p. 77).

Even so, despite the socioeconomic gains since the 1960s middle-class African Americans do not have the same economic privileges as middle-class White Americans (Cole & Omari, 2003; Murry & Liu, 2014). For example, the median net worth of White American households is 13 times the median net worth of Black American households (Kochar & Fry, 2014). Current estimates indicate that more than half of African Americans born into middle-income households experience downward social mobility as adults (Rodrique & Reeves, 2015). This is partly because most middle-class African Americans are from working class families, and “have achieved, rather than inherited, their [middle-class] status” (Cole & Omari, 2003, p. 789). First- and second-generation middle-class African Americans also are more likely than middle-class White Americans to have family members who depend on them for financial support (Heflin & Pattillo,

2006). Taken together, these social indices suggest that many middle-class African American families have few financial protections in times of crisis. The economic diversity of the Black middle class, then, must be considered when studying African American middle-class mothers and their families.

To date, there are only a handful of studies that examine how African American professional women negotiate their work and family demands. Blair-Loy and DeHart (2003) studied six cohorts of African American female lawyers who entered the legal profession between 1946 and 1982 in order to determine how marriage and motherhood affected the career trajectories of African American women in elite occupations. Blair-Loy and DeHart found that for African American women neither marriage nor motherhood depressed their wages. But similar to White American women, African American women who had not experienced any career disruptions tended to delay or forego motherhood. The authors ultimately concluded that unlike White American women, African American women appear to have access to unique family resources that allow them to integrate work and motherhood. However, Blair-Loy and DeHart did not provide a description of the specific family resources that the African American women in their study used in order to facilitate their continued employment.

Dawn Dow's (2016a) qualitative interview study with 24 African American middle-class and upper-middle-class career mothers offers potential answers to this question. Participants were drawn from three different metropolitan areas: San Francisco Bay Area, Philadelphia, and New York City. Based on mothers' interviews Dow identified three cultural expectations of motherhood that guided mothers' family and work decisions: economic self-reliance, paid employment, and kin-care. In contrast to

previous research that assumes that mothers defend their family and work decisions against hegemonic mothering ideologies, Dow found that her study participants evaluated themselves against an alternative mothering ideology – integrated motherhood.

Importantly, integrated mothering is not an accommodation or modification of hegemonic mothering ideologies. Rather, according to Dow, the integrated mothering ideology is based on an entirely different set of assumptions. As Dow notes, hegemonic ideologies posit that “employment conflicts with motherhood, motherhood occurs within a self-sufficient nuclear family, and childrearing is a mother’s primary duty” (p. 193). The mothers in Dow’s study did not adhere to these expectations. Contrarily, they championed economic self-reliance as a source of marital power and safety net in case of divorce or economic hardship. In addition, mothers viewed work outside the home as a duty of “good” mothers. Paid employment was seen neither as a threat to their children’s well-being nor a decision that required justification. Dow explains, however, that this focus on independence and self-sufficiency did not extend to mothers’ childcare arrangements. Mothers relied on their extended kin networks for childcare and described their decision as the “normal way to manage work and family” in order to continue in their careers (p. 191).

Several results are worthwhile to highlight in terms of their relation to hegemonic ideologies, as well as the experiences of lower-income African American mothers. First, the value of economic self-reliance was not viewed as an evolution toward a more modern and egalitarian model. Instead, it was considered a continuation of family ideals that emerged in the mid-twentieth century among elite black women who advised African American women to seek egalitarian relationships and intellectual equality in their

marriages, through education, careers, and activism (Landry, 2000). Second, within the integrated mothering ideology, paid employment is an expectation, whereas the decision to stay home is a deviant choice that may be subject to ridicule. Moreover, the reliance on kin-care, as Dow argues, is a matter of cultural tradition and should not be viewed solely as a strategy used to combine work and motherhood. In other words, the practice of kin-care is not an accommodation of intensive motherhood because it is not based on a mothering ideology that privileges own-mother care in the first place.

At the same time, Dow acknowledges that cultural beliefs and practices can be either supportive or unsupportive of a particular mothering ideology. In this case, the practice of integrated motherhood is supported by access to kin-care and encouragement from parents and community members to be self-reliant and work outside the home. But what about mothers who do not adhere to these expectations? Dow suggests that future research is needed to better understand their experiences.

Riché Daniel Barnes' (2016) recently published monograph is a tour de force in terms of its illumination of the different experiences of African American married professional women. Barnes' study is situated in Atlanta, Georgia, where she observed and interviewed African American women who had school-age children. At the outset, Barnes explains that her interest in the topic emanated from a desire to understand the experiences of African American middle-class married mothers who modify their careers or leave the workforce. As Barnes points out such a decision is antithetical to an integrated mothering ideology that links work to constructions of what it means to be a "good" mother.

However, research conducted prior to Barnes' study indicated that not all African American middle-class mothers adhere to the integrated mothering ideology. For example, based on qualitative interviews with thirty-one African American middle-class married mothers, Dean, Marsh, and Landry (2013) found that while most women endorsed a *work-family integration* ideology, nearly one-quarter of their study participants did not. Among this latter group, an overwhelming majority of women relied on *family devotion* schemas to explain their decision to exit the workforce after the birth of their child. That is, being a stay-at-home mother was viewed as the morally "right" thing to do, as they believed that motherhood required "single-mindedness." This ideology appears to be embedded in a work-family conflict perspective.

To this end, one of Barnes' aims was to challenge work-family models that dichotomize "working" and "stay-at-home" mother identities, as Barnes suggests there is a slippage between these categories for African American career mothers. Barnes introduces the framework *strategic mothering* "to account for the myriad ways in which Black mothers continuously navigate and redefine their relationship with work to best fit the needs of their families and their communities" (p. 2). Similar to the mothers in Anita Garey's (1995) study of female hospital workers, Barnes' informants expressed a desire to be more "available" to their families, which at times made it difficult to continue full-time employment. Barnes offers a new work-family identity scheme to account for the work-family strategies that mothers enacted: "modified full-time career moms", "modified stay-at-home moms", and "available-flexible career moms."

Modified full-time career mothers are similar to the group of mothers in Dow's study. They adhered to an integrated mothering ideology. At the same time, they reported

the need for increased flexibility to meet their work and family responsibilities. Modified stay-at-home mothers represented the trajectories of women who exited the workforce. However, although they no longer had a formal attachment to an employer, many found ways to generate income while they stayed home with their children. Available-flexible career mothers usually accepted part-time work in order to increase schedule flexibility. Barnes' observations indicate that there are a multitude of factors that compel African American married professional women to exit or modify their careers. These include: schedule flexibility, family leave policies, access to low or no-cost childcare (preferably, kin-care), and workplace diversity and inclusion issues. In this way, Barnes' findings suggest that structural conditions (e.g., labor market structure, employer demands, racial discrimination, to name a few) and access to social support for cultural practices (e.g., kin-care) impact whether African American career women are able to adhere to the expectations of integrated motherhood.

Barnes' study also confirmed the Dean et al. (2013) results on family devotion schemas in that the mothers she interviewed were embracing a new form of strategic motherhood – one that prioritized marriage and children (e.g., the nuclear family) over kinship ties. Such a stance represents a departure from the integrated mothering ideology that Dow (2016a) describes. Interestingly, mothers did not make sense of this prioritization of marriage through a framework of hegemonic ideologies that privileges the nuclear family unit. Instead, mothers situated their position within the historical ideology of “uplift” whereby middle-class African Americans – through their personal achievements and activism – “uplift” those who are less fortunate (Cole & Omari, 2003).



In this way, the mothers in Barnes' study redefined their commitment to their children and husbands as a broader commitment to the African American community.

Furthermore, mothers expressed a desire to rebut popular images of African American women and their families. African American mothers have been characterized as pathological, dysfunctional, and deviant (Carothers, 1990) while African American men have been characterized as irresponsible, erratic, and even dangerous (Hill & Sprague, 1999). Given widespread depictions of African American mothers and fathers as incapable of raising successful children, the mothers in Barnes' study saw their marriages and families as a counterpoint to such images. Barnes referred to this phenomenon as the *neo-politics of respectability*. Such a strategy is reminiscent of upper class black women in the early twentieth century who believed it was their calling as members of the "racial uplift" movement to "teach an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good, aspiring women...not by noisy protestations of what we are not, but by a dignified showing of what we are" (Landy, 2000, p. 60).

These recent studies help to fill an important gap in the literature. Each of the authors illuminates how African American middle-class mothers' raced, classed, and gendered position affects their experience of motherhood. In particular, they examined the different concerns and challenges that African American mothers of the middle- and upper-middle classes deal with in their negotiation of work and family responsibilities. However, none of the above studies examined how particular racialized gender ideologies together with African American middle-class mothers' current social and economic realities structure their socialization practices with adolescent children.

### **African American Motherhood and the Socialization of African American Children**

African American mothers' socialization practices reflect the efforts of African American parents to teach their children how to survive in the face of racial discrimination but not "at the expense of their self-esteem" (Collins, 2007b, p. 322). Previous research indicates that African American mothers and fathers are involved in the racial socialization process. Still, African American women are often considered 'culture bearers' (Barnes, 2016, p. 3) within African American families and communities. As such, African American women and men may contend with distinct gender expectations (and stereotypes) as they parent their children.

### **Raising Children at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender**

African American parents are keenly aware of the life course challenges their children are likely to endure due to their racial group membership. Preparing children for racial discrimination, teaching children about African American cultural and intellectual traditions, and cultivating a strong sense of self represent the most common elements of African American parents' racial socialization practices (Coard & Sellers, 2005; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2009; Tamis-LeMonda & Kohana-Kalman, 2009). In addition, African American children are often taught that education is the most honorable and effective route to achieving social mobility, respectability, and independence (Cole & Omari, 2003; Johnson, 2013). Although most African American parents develop strategies to address discrimination (Crowley & Curenton, 2011), research indicates that personal experience and sociodemographic factors influence whether parents use race-conscious or color-blind approaches (Hughes & Chen, 1997).

**Class and racial socialization.** Shirley Hill's (2005) examination of child socialization practices within a socioeconomically diverse sample of African American families revealed that middle-class mothers and fathers reported being more worried than working-class parents that their children would encounter racial barriers to their success. One possible explanation for this difference is that due to historical and contemporary patterns of race and class segregation, economically disadvantaged African American families are more likely to live, work, and attend school in predominantly black social contexts (Feagin, 2014). Early work by Thornton and colleagues (1990) exploring the sociodemographic correlates of racial socialization found that African American parents (especially mothers) in predominantly black neighborhoods were less likely to transmit race-related socialization messages than those living in racially diverse communities (Lesane-Brown, 2006). For many African American families, middle class status increases the likelihood that their children will spend a significant amount of time within predominantly white social settings (i.e., schools, neighborhoods). As a result, African American mothers and fathers may perceive their children as especially likely to experience racial discrimination (Tatum, 1987).

Specifically, for African American middle-class families, racial discrimination is a threat to social class reproduction. Previous studies have assumed that the class privileges associated with middle-class status accrue the same advantages across racial groups. In her ethnographic study of social class and childrearing practices in African American and White American families, Annette Lareau (2002) found that middle-class parents used a *concerted cultivation* childrearing approach. Through their involvement in "organized (cultivating) activities" and interactions with professionals and other middle-

class adults outside the home, middle-class children developed the skills needed to thrive within mainstream institutions “that demand individual achievement as the basis of distinction” (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p. 269). Although Lareau (2002) acknowledged that African American middle-class parents often have concerns about racial discrimination, she ultimately concluded that because both groups of middle-class parents focused on developing their children’s cultural capital, African American middle-class children would be equally able to capitalize on their social advantage and access the same opportunities.

More recent research offers a different perspective. Barnes (2016) introduced the construct *strategic cultivation* to describe what African American professional women (and their husbands) do to prepare their children for adulthood. Barnes explained that she uses *strategic cultivation* to “better conceptualize the plans [middle-class African American] families find themselves trying to implement for their children” (p. 144).

According to Barnes,

[African American families] must combine the benefits of strategic assimilation and concerted cultivation. With strategic assimilation African American middle-class families, particularly the upper-middle-class, have to perform class markers that offer two signals: one to Black Americans that they are authentically Black, and one to white Americans that they are not like “those” Black people” (“ghetto,” “ratchet,” or outside mainstream class markers) (Lacy, 2007). In addition, through concerted cultivation, children must be taught the practices that will ensure social class reproduction as represented in particular cultural capital cues (Lareau [2003] 2011) (p. 145).

Thus, African American middle-class mothers’ socialization practices involve helping their children cultivate and negotiate race- and class-based identities; a process rendered invisible in Lareau’s original theoretical formulation.

**Gender and racial socialization.** Prior research suggests that the age and sex of the child affects African American parents' socialization practices. In particular, the parenting activities of mothers and fathers reflect concerns about gendered racism. Stereotypical depictions of African American girls as loud, disrespectful, and sexually promiscuous and boys as aggressive, disobedient, and threatening are often used as symbolic justifications for racial inequality and gender policing (Chito Childs, Laudone, & Tavernier, 2010). In an effort to teach African American children and adolescents to resist the oppressive force of these 'controlling images' (Collins, 2000, p. 5), mothers and fathers may tailor their socialization messages and practices to reflect what they perceive as the particular way that racism operates in the lives of girls and boys (Hill & Sprague, 1999). Previous quantitative studies have shown that female children and adolescent girls are more likely to receive messages about racial pride and achievement, whereas messages provided to male children and adolescent boys emphasize racial barriers, discrimination, and coping with racism (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Thomas & Speight, 1999). In a more recent qualitative interview study, African American mothers expressed different concerns about their adolescent daughters and sons (Elliott & Aseltine, 2012). Mothers reported fear that their sons would experience racial harassment and become involved in the criminal justice system. In contrast, sexual vulnerability and sexual stereotyping of minority girls were central themes in mothers' narratives about their daughters.

Significantly, in the case of African American sons, affluence does not seem to assuage mothers' concerns about their sons' physical safety (i.e., racial profiling). Dawn Dow (2016b) conducted qualitative interviews with 60 African American middle-class

and upper-middle-class mothers with sons under the age of 10 and found that mothers “believed their sons would face harsh treatment and be criminalized by teachers, police officers, and the public because of their racial identity and gender” (p. 163). As a result, mothers were vigilant in their efforts to ensure that their sons were treated as individuals and not based on racial stereotypes of black male criminality. These efforts included mothers managing their sons’ social and academic environments as well as monitoring their sons’ emotional expressions and physical appearance.

### **Raising African American Adolescent Girls**

Especially relevant to the present study is the strand of psychology and family studies research that focuses on the socialization strategies African American mothers use with their adolescent daughters. Parent-child relationships during adolescence are often characterized by negotiations over autonomy. As a result, some scholars have found that African American mothers feel increased pressure to speak with their adolescent children about the social realities of racism in preparation for their entry into adult society (Costigan, Cauce, & Etchison, 2007; Elliott & Aseltine, 2012). Because the everyday lives of African American adult women are impacted by interlocking systems of inequality mothers’ socialization of their adolescent daughters reflect their attempts to manage the intersectional effects of race and gender on African American girls’ identity development (Ward, 2007).

**Gendered racial socialization.** Drawing on findings from a qualitative interview study with an economically diverse sample of nearly 70 African American parents and teenagers, Janie Ward (2000) found that some mothers rely on “tongues of fire truth telling” to disabuse their daughters of idyllic notions about how the world works in an

effort to “build character and psychological strength” (Ward, 2007, p. 245) that will allow them to persevere despite the barriers that still exist in society. However, one of the unintended consequences of this “tell-it-like-it-is” approach is that such a harsh critique of the world (and girls’ presumed false consciousness) can overwhelm African American girls without helping them develop the sort of critical perspective on the world that is needed to combat the psychological assaults of racism and sexism. In other words, as Robinson and Ward (1991) have argued, not all forms of resistance are healthy or conducive to social change. Indeed, in later work, Ward (2007) identified other strategies that are more likely to foster psychologically healthy forms of resistance in African American girls. Ward recommended that parents teach girls how to establish criteria for determining if discrimination is, or is not, at play in a given situation. Specifically, Ward suggests that adult women and young girls can work together to find smart and effective ways for African American girls to respond to racism and sexism and to create opportunities for African American girls to develop a positive self-concept that challenges harmful images of African American girls and women.

Thomas and King (2007) sought to identify the specific messages that mothers transmit to their adolescent daughters (aged 13-21). In particular, by using a dyadic methodological approach, the authors were able to examine daughters’ perceptions of their mothers’ advice. Thirty-six African American mother-daughter dyads were administered a multi-part questionnaire that included an open-ended question about gendered racial socialization. Daughters were asked, *What are the specific messages that your mother gives you on being an African American woman/girl?* (p. 138). Likewise, mothers were asked, *What are the specific messages that you teach your daughter(s) on*

*race and gender?* (p. 139). Thomas and King found that the majority of mothers' messages focused on self-determination and assertiveness (19.5%). The second most frequent message was related to self-pride (15% of responses). Daughters reported that most of the messages they received from their mothers focused on self-pride (21.3%) and self-determination and assertiveness (17.3%). These findings "suggest that daughters experience[d] and processe[d] the socialization messages as mothers intended" (p. 140). Similar to the parents in Ward's (2000) study, mothers' messages indicate that they assumed their daughters would confront racism and sexism, but did not want their daughters to let these obstacles deter them as they pursued their goals. Mothers' emphasis on "self-determination" and "assertiveness" also suggests that they relied on a strength discourse (e.g., the "strong Black woman" image) in their efforts to encourage their daughters' perseverance. However, the authors also note that an exclusive focus on individual strength can make it difficult for African American girls and women to ask for support and seek help in times of crisis. Interestingly, neither mothers nor daughters in the Thomas and King (2007) study reported that messages of physical beauty or sexuality were part of their mother-daughter communications. The former is particularly striking given that studies on African American preadolescent girls (aged 11-13) and adolescent women (aged 15-21) have found that issues related to dominant and cultural beauty standards are salient parts of the gendered racial identity formation process for African American girls (Stephens & Few, 2007; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011).

**Sexual socialization.** Empirical investigations of parental communications about sexuality-related topics are mostly relegated to a separate body of literature that specifically examines maternal sexual socialization. Yet, African American mothers'



gendered racial socialization practices are influenced by their concerns about how racialized sexual imagery of African American girls endangers their emotional and physical safety (Hunter, Guerrero, & Cohen, 2007; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Stokes, 2007; Ward, 2007). As an antidote, many African American mothers rely on discourses of black femininity that champion strength, independence, and middle-class respectability. Evident in some mothers' sexual socialization messages are their own anxieties about their daughters making the same mistakes they did (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004). Based on interview data from eleven African American mothers, Nwoga (2000) found that mothers used stories about their experiences as examples of what not to do, emphasizing how an early or unplanned pregnancy impeded their ability to achieve their educational and career goals. Similarly, in a qualitative interview study with emerging adult women (aged 18-26) respondents indicated that the maternal messages they received about intimate relationships included discouragement from engaging in sexual relationships (Grange, Brubaker, & Corneille, 2011). Such a finding is consistent with previous research that indicates that many African American mothers encourage sexual modesty as a way to counter stereotypes of African American womanhood that emphasize sexual aggression and irresponsibility (Sears, 2010).

At the same time, daughters report receiving conflicting messages from their mothers about how to navigate intimate relationships. For example, ninety African American female undergraduate and graduate students reported that their mothers wanted them to prioritize their education and career over relationships with men, but also encouraged them to adhere to traditional gender norms within heterosexual relationships (Packer-Williams, 2009). Daughters revealed that their mothers believed that women

were equal to men, but that in relationships women should support and take care of their male partners. Johnson (2013) notes that these competing gender ideals often leave African American young women in a difficult position trying to negotiate a set of expectations that may be antithetical to their personal values and place the burden on them to behave in ways that accommodate men's desires.

Research on middle-class African American mothers' sexual socialization practices is scant and primarily limited to examinations of the relationship between maternal sexual socialization messages, parental values about premarital sex, and the sexual behavior of adolescent girls and young adult women. In research on middle-class African American college women, conservative attitudes about premarital sex and fewer discussions about sexuality-related topics were related to lower levels of sexual experience (Bynum, 2007). In another study using data from a sample of 294 middle-income and upper-income African American adolescent girls and their mothers from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (ADD Health), Usher-Seriki, Bynum, and Callands (2008) found that delays in sexual intercourse were related to mothers' messages about the negative consequences of premarital sex and mothers' sexual values. One study of college-age women found that maternal sexual socialization was not related to daughters' virginity status (Barnes & Bynum, 2010a). Overall, the emphasis of these studies is on the effect of maternal sexual socialization on behavioral outcomes such as vaginal-penile intercourse, heavy petting, and experimentation with oral sex.

### **Limitations of Research on the Socialization Practices of African American Middle-Class Mothers**

Current research on African American middle-class mothers' socialization practices is limited in scope. To begin, previous research on middle-class African

American parents tends to emphasize parental concerns about discrimination and racial identity development, especially for children growing up in predominantly white neighborhoods. There is also some evidence to suggest that the sex of the child shapes parental perceptions of race-related challenges. Less is known about how social class and neighborhood context influence the gendered racial socialization messages and sexuality-related communications that African American middle-class mothers provide to their adolescent children, and in the case of the present study, their adolescent daughters.

Second, existing models of age-specific black femininities have been elaborated based on the lived experience of economically disadvantaged African American girls. As a result, they reflect the strategies that adolescent girls (and their mothers and/or community othermothers) use in order to facilitate upward mobility. For example, based on ethnographic work in the 1960s, Joyce Ladner (1972) developed a typology to describe how poor African American girls coming-of-age in the inner city thought about and approached the transition to womanhood. One of the four typologies she identified was the “middle-class Black woman model,” which emphasized “a commitment to education, a desire to leave the community, and a conformist attitude to dominant expectations of white middle-class women” (p. 140). More recently, Black feminist scholars have examined how poor and working-class African American girls living in distressed neighborhoods make sense of their embodiment of different femininities, including gender expressions that are marginalized within the wider society, and are antithetical to particular notions of black middle-class respectability (Jones, 2009).

This line of scholarship also suggests that dichotomies between “good” and “ghetto” girls or “decent” and “street” girls can have significant material consequences

for young women living in under-resourced communities. That is, girls who are labeled as “good” or “decent” based on their comportment often are favored for recruitment into programs to support the positive development of “at risk” youth. As an example Stephanie Sears (2010) observed and interviewed the staff and participants of the Girls Empowerment Project; a program that served the largest public housing development in the city where Sears conducted her ethnographic research. As part of the study, Sears documented how the middle-class African American female staff (e.g., community othermothers) tried to socialize a self-selected group of girls from the community into what the staff considered to be a respectable model of African American womanhood that could support girls’ self-esteem and “external success” (p. 100). According to Sears, these efforts at times produced tension between the staff and the girls who sought a model of African American girlhood that would allow them to be upwardly mobile and “streetwise” in order to gain the respect they needed to survive their neighborhood contexts (p. 139).

But what about African American girls for whom life in the middle-class is all they have known? Is Ladner’s model relevant to them? Do mothers advocate a “conformist attitude to dominant expectations of white middle-class women” as a strategy to maintain middle-class status? In other words, what parental concerns or challenges emerge in raising African American girls when the social issues associated with poverty are diminished or removed? Robinson and Ward (1991) suggest that external social forces (e.g., weakened social safety net, residential segregation, race and gender discrimination, neglectful educational policies) converge to undermine the life chances of African American girls in low-income urban communities. To what extent (if

at all) do these social processes function today in the lives of African American middle-class female adolescents and their families?

The little we do know about African American middle-class mothers' approaches to gendered racial socialization with their daughters is based on scholarship that has three important limitations: (a) middle-class parents represent a sub-sample of the larger study population, (b) parents with elementary-school-age children are the primary focus, and (c) college-age women report on their mothers' attitudes and behaviors but their mothers are not included in the study. Of note, in the rare instance that mothers have been included, the research method often limits what can be learned about mothers' experiences. For example, Thomas and King (2007) used mothers' and daughters' written responses to an open-ended question in order to explore the content of African American mothers' communications about race and gender. Nonetheless this format may limit how much mothers are able to say and not all mothers may feel comfortable communicating their ideas in writing. Moreover, the measurement used in the study (e.g., *What are the specific messages you teach your daughter(s) on race and gender?*) (p. 139) only provided information about the types of messages mothers transmitted. We do not learn about the individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors that motivated mothers to use those particular messages (and not others) in the first place.

Finally, sexuality-related communications between mothers and daughters are largely absent in studies on the parenting practices of African American middle-class mothers. As previously discussed, a possible explanation is that studies on African American middle-class mothers tend to focus on mothers with school-age children (aged 6-10). Still, based on the limited data that are available, African American mothers'

sexual communications with their daughters reveal broader concerns about the impact of race and gender barriers on their daughters' futures. This suggests that it would be useful to consider mothers' sexual attitudes and socialization strategies alongside their approaches to other domains of adolescent development.

### **Black Feminist Theories, Intersectionality, and Black Family Studies Research**

Theories guide “how we identify, name, interpret, and write about experience” (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett, 2003, p. 206). As an interpretive framework intersectionality has been used to understand the lived experiences of multiply marginalized people (Nash, 2008). Although the term was coined by critical legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the assumptions that underlie this theoretical framework were first articulated nearly two decades prior by women of color feminists (Few-Demo, 2014). For example, Black feminist activists and social theorists argued that any gender analysis of power and domination must take seriously how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other social categories of difference to influence the life chances of individuals and groups (King, 1988; Mullings, 2005). In particular, Black feminists questioned the validity of scholarship on African American women that extrapolated from the race and gender realities of White American women and African American men (Collins, 2000; Hancock, 2007; Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982). Intersectionality thus provides a framework to theorize gender as an organizing principle of family life, but to do so in a way that gives voice to the distinctive material circumstances of African American women and other women of color.

For the purposes of the present study, intersectionality offers a critical theoretical approach to exploring the ideologies, experiences, and practices of African American

middle-class mothers in the United States. As Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) note, critical social theories encourage researchers to “analyze the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern action in a specific context” (p. 206). Intersectional approaches to family research contextualize the attitudes and behaviors of individual social actors. To this end, mothers’ decisions and outcomes are understood within the race, class, and gender realities in which they occur. In doing so, it is possible not only to examine how “situational demands and structural constraints” influence the decision-making process of African American middle-class mothers and their families, but also to ascertain how particular social privileges and opportunities are “differentially distributed” based on social structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Fox & Murry, p. 1166). Therefore, this approach can be used to produce scholarship that addresses facets of African American motherhood previously neglected or misrepresented in the research literature (Thompson & Walker, 1995).

Intersectionality also provides a framework in which to understand within-group variation. Although Black feminist theory asserts that African American women share a common worldview grounded in their shared experience of race and gender oppression, as a critical social theory, it also recognizes that “individuals have potentially conflicting overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” based on differences in age, social class, sexual orientation, and national origin (Few, 2007, p. 456). Intersectionality encourages researchers to move away from a generalization of African American experience, and toward an examination of the “cultural nuances” (Few, 2007, p. 466) that exist within African American communities (Few-Demo, 2014). In other words, we must not assume that the experience of lower-income African American mothers can stand in

for the experience of middle-class African American mothers. Thus, an intersectional examination of African American middle-class motherhood addresses the theoretical and empirical erasure of African American middle-class mothers that historically has plagued studies of contemporary motherhood in the United States.

Research on African American family socialization has flourished in part due to the historical efforts of African American psychologists and family scholars in the 1970s and 1980s to correct earlier deficit models of African American family life (Few, 2007; see Allen, 1978; Billingsley, 1974; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1978, 1981; Staples, 1985). In contrast to early social science research that characterized African American families as uniquely disordered and deviant, these scholars used “multilayered, contextual, and more process-oriented” approaches to examine the multiple ecological systems that influenced the social health and well-being of African American families (McLoyd, Hill, & Dodge, 2005, p. 12). In the process critical family scholars highlighted the strength and resourcefulness of Black American families and how family survival strategies are transmitted across generations.

As part of their investigations, family researchers examined the lessons that African American parents teach their children about race in order to foster resilience. Indeed, in the family science literature on African American families, racial socialization is identified as a defining and enduring cultural feature of African American parenting (Crowley & Curenton, 2011). Yet, in order to fully understand the socialization practices that African American middle-class mothers enact with their children, it requires “an appreciation for the social location from which they take on this parenting task” (Garcia, 2012, p. 55). As Ann Swidler (1986) suggests, “culture is not a unified system pushing



action in a consistent direction but, rather, a ‘tool kit’ or repertoire of skills, habits, and styles that provides the resources from which individuals and groups select and develop strategies of action” (pp. 275-277). By using an intersectional lens, the present study considers the interaction between culture and structure and its effect on the everyday lives and socialization practices of African American middle-class mothers raising adolescent daughters. As such, in an effort to address the limitations of previous literature, this dissertation project answers the following questions:

1. How do interlocking systems of race, class, and gender influence the mothering ideologies and practices of African American middle-class mothers?
2. What do African American middle-class mothers perceive as the challenges they encounter in preparing their adolescent daughters for entry into adult womanhood? What are mothers’ perceptions about how race, class, and gender influence the challenges they face as mothers?
3. What ideologies of gender and sexuality are employed in African American middle-class mothers’ socialization of their adolescent daughters?
4. What social supports influence the socialization practices African American middle-class mothers use with their adolescent daughters?

### Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine the ideologies, experiences, and practices of African American middle-class mothers. Because I was interested in exploring the subjective understandings and meanings this specific group of mothers ascribes to raising adolescent daughters in twenty-first century America, I employed a qualitative interview method (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). According to Weiss (1994) there is much to learn about people's interior experiences through one-on-one interviews:

We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy to grief, that together constitute the human condition (p. 1).

Such a method is especially appropriate to use in research that aims to explore the behind-the-scenes care work that African American middle-class mothers perform in order to create the lives they want for themselves and their families.

A qualitative interview method is also consistent with the theoretical orientation of this research project. A central goal of feminist research is "to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience" (Lather, 1991, p. 7), and to interrogate the unequal social conditions that frame women's everyday lives. Specifically, intersectionality, with its roots in U.S. Black women's experience, suggests that women's lives are shaped by multiple and interlocking oppressions such as race and class (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). However, as Elliott and Aseltine (2012) note "race, class, and gender do not simply intersect in people's lives, [rather] they are sociopolitically constructed categories that work in complex ways so that privilege and oppression, belonging and difference inform people's everyday perceptions and ways of

navigating their social environments” (p. 722). Interviews give researchers access to this type of knowledge. Through in-depth interviews, researchers can learn about people’s beliefs, private lives, and significant past events that might otherwise be hidden from view. In this way a qualitative interview method allowed me to explore issues that affect African American middle-class mothers that are obscured in discourse on the American middle class and contemporary African American family life.

In this chapter, I describe the study design and procedures, analytic strategy, and limitations of this dissertation research project. I also provide an evaluation of the research process and its effectiveness, or what Shenton (2004) calls a “reflective appraisal of the project” (p. 72). This includes a discussion of the challenges I encountered as well as the courses of action I took to address them.

### **Study Design**

**Participants.** The study sample is comprised of thirty-six adult mothers. Participation was limited to mothers who identified as Black or African American, held a Bachelor’s degree, and were raising a daughter between the ages of 12 and 21. Participants were recruited primarily from the Northeast region of the United States, with most residing in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York.

Educational attainment was used as the primary social class indicator. Hardaway and McLoyd (2009) suggest that education “may be a more appropriate indicator of middle class status because African Americans often do not receive salaries and employment opportunities commensurate with their level of education” (p. 244). For the purpose of this study, income served as a secondary measure of social class. In previous research African Americans with household incomes at or above the national median

income have been categorized as middle class (Murry, 1996). Yet using the national median household income as a barometer of middle-class status can obfuscate within-group variation in the economic resources and class-based experiences of middle-class African American families. To address this measurement limitation, I adopt Karyn Lacy's (2007) model of middle-class incomes to further contextualize the experiences of mothers who participated in this research. Annual incomes less than \$50,000 were considered lower-middle-class, \$50,000-\$100,000 were core middle-class, and over \$100,000 were upper-middle-class.

**Participant recruitment.** I used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants. I chose this sampling approach in order to seek out individuals who due to their experiences as members of a particular population were uniquely positioned to contribute knowledge about the phenomenon of interest (Weiss, 1994). Active participant recruitment occurred from June 2014 to March 2016. Because there was no one place I could go to find African American middle-class mothers with adolescent daughters I had to rely on disparate recruitment methods. First, I reached out to individuals within my professional networks to ask for their assistance in spreading the word about the research project. This method only yielded four interview contacts.

I then broadened my recruitment efforts to focus on prominent civic and social organizations that had a demonstrated commitment to the social and economic advancement of African American families and communities. In particular, I sent recruitment emails to leaders of civil rights organizations, volunteer service organizations, African American family-based organizations, African American Greek-letter sororities, as well as African American and minority-identified college alumni and

professional associations. Recruitment emails provided a description of the researcher's background, study rationale and methods, inclusion criteria, and included a study flyer that could be posted on community bulletin boards or advertised across list serves (see Appendix D). The majority of these emails went unanswered. However, among the few individuals who responded to my inquiry, all agreed to share the information with their members. Perhaps, most important, they also invited me to attend public events sponsored by their organizations where I was given permission to make an announcement about the project and distribute flyers. This opportunity was invaluable in gaining access to middle-class and upper-middle-class African Americans who tended to be geographically dispersed and underrepresented in mainstream middle-class and elite institutions. Finally, I used a "snowball" sampling technique wherein interviewees recommended other mothers for participation.

### **Sample Characteristics**

**Age.** Mothers ranged in age from 31 to 63 ( $n=35$ ). The mean age of mothers was 47.74 ( $n= 35$ ). One mother declined to report her exact age.

**Race/Ethnicity.** All mothers self-identified as Black or African American; one mother also identified as Bi/Multiracial. Thirty-three mothers had U.S. born parents. When I discuss mothers as a group I use the term African American to denote the generational status of most study participants as the descendants of enslaved Africans in the mainland United States. Throughout the thesis I use Black and African American interchangeably to refer more broadly to the social, historical, and cultural experiences of people of African descent in the United States.

**Religious affiliation.** Mothers identified their religious affiliation as Catholic ( $n=4$ ), Christian-Protestant ( $n=27$ ), and Muslim ( $n=1$ ). Four mothers did not report a religious affiliation.

**Socioeconomic status.** All study participants held a Bachelor's degree. Thirty-two mothers also held graduate/professional degrees (89% of all participants). One mother reported a family income below \$50,000 (lower-middle-class). Three mothers reported family incomes between \$50,000-\$100,000 (core middle-class). Most mothers reported family incomes above \$100,000 (89% of all participants). The majority of the study sample, then, had family incomes nearly twice the national median and more than two times the national median for Black Americans (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017).

**Residence.** Most mothers lived in areas throughout the Northeastern United States with few black middle-class neighborhoods. Twenty-four mothers resided in predominantly white middle-class neighborhoods (67% of participants). As will be discussed in the results chapters that follow, the underrepresentation of Black Americans in these communities had important consequences for the organization of family life as well as mothers' socialization practices.

**Marital status.** Twenty-five mothers were married at the time of the interview. Six mothers were divorced ( $n=4$ ) or separated ( $n=2$ ). Four participants were single and had never been married. Nearly all married mothers reported that their spouses were college-educated professionals in middle-income and upper-income occupations. Only one mother was in a mixed-status marriage (e.g. husband was not a four-year college graduate). Of the 25 married mothers in the study sample, twenty-three were married to African American men; two mothers were interracially married.

**Children.** All mothers were currently raising a daughter, aged 12-21. This particular age range was selected in order to increase the likelihood that participants were actively engaged in socialization around issues related to sexuality (Barnes & Bynum, 2010b; Hill, 1999). Mothers had between one to six children and the children were between the ages of 1 and 29 years old. Mothers had either biological ( $n=32$ ) or adoptive ( $n=4$ ) children but not both. Seventeen mothers only had female children (47% of sample). The adolescent daughters who served as the study target(s) in mothers' interviews spanned three developmental periods: early adolescence, 12-14 ( $n=18$ ), middle adolescence, 15-17 ( $n=17$ ), and late adolescence/emerging adulthood, 18-21 ( $n=7$ ). Further information on participant characteristics can be found in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection process followed the University of Connecticut's IRB-approved study procedures for this dissertation project. Prior to scheduling interviews, I spoke by phone to potential participants in order to describe the study purpose and procedures, the amount of time that would be needed to complete the interview, and plans for the study results (Creswell, 2013). Once I confirmed that the potential participant met the inclusion criteria we then selected a mutually convenient and agreed upon time and location for the interview. I interviewed most participants in their home or office. I met a few mothers at local libraries or coffee shops with low foot traffic. In total, I conducted 36 semi-structured interviews. Thirty-two interviews were completed in person and four respondents were interviewed via phone. Interviews lasted between 46 minutes and 3 hours. The average interview lasted 1 hour and 50 minutes.

**Interview process.** I started all interviews with a description of the interview procedures. Participants then were asked to read the study consent form (see Appendix E). If participants agreed to the study procedures, they were asked to sign two copies of the consent form; one kept by the principal investigator (dissertation advisor), and the other for the participant's records. After the consent forms were signed, participants were given a demographic questionnaire to complete. This form included questions about the participant's racial/ethnic identification, place of birth, religious affiliation, education, occupation, and income (see Appendix B). Once participants answered these set of questions, I asked for permission to record the interview. All participants agreed to be audio-recorded.

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked participants if they would be willing to share information about the research with other mothers from similar backgrounds. Second, I reconfirmed the participant's preferred method of contact (e.g., phone, e-mail) if they had agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. I then thanked interviewees for their time and interview. Mothers did not receive compensation for their participation due to limited financial resources.

Because I found it challenging to listen attentively while taking notes I elected to write field notes instead. If feasible, after each interview, I set aside thirty minutes for quiet reflection to think and write about what I learned from the interview (Kvale, 2009). As I conducted more interviews, I started to document the recurrence of specific experiences, perspectives, and behaviors across interviews. Field notes that were analytical in nature were later incorporated into analytic memos.



**Interview protocol.** I used an interview guide to structure and prompt the discussion of a range of topics related to the central research questions (Weiss, 1994). The interview guide was divided into four sections. Each section consisted of two types of questions: *introductory questions* that were open-ended in order to yield spontaneous and rich descriptions from participants about a specific issue or phenomenon, and *probing questions* meant to facilitate further elaboration on a given subject (Kvale, 2009).

The first section of the interview guide contained questions about participants' early life experiences in an effort to illuminate how mothers came to understand themselves as African American women and their position within the U.S. social structure. In the second section, participants' thoughts and feelings about motherhood were the subject of inquiry. Mothers also were asked about their childrearing attitudes and strategies. This section of the interview dovetailed into a more focused discussion related to preparing African American girls for adult/womanhood (section three). The last section included questions designed to elicit mothers' attitudes on social issues such as contemporary race relations. At the end of the interview I invited participants to address any issues that were not covered in the interview guide that they felt were paramount to my ability to understand their experience.

As part of the data collection process, changes were made to the interview guide including the revision and reorganization of questions, as well as the development of probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These changes were made based on insights I gained through debriefing sessions with the principal investigator (dissertation advisor) and transcription process. However, these changes did not affect the major topical areas

covered in the interview or the overall flow of the interview. The finalized version of the interview guide is included in Appendix C.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process for the present study was influenced by Richard Boyatzis' (1998) work on thematic analysis. Thematic analysis represents a process of making sense of qualitative information through the development of codes<sup>3</sup>. These codes are then used to develop themes<sup>4</sup> and identify interrelationships amongst relevant concepts revealed through the process of data analysis.

However, as Creswell (2009) suggests, data analysis is a custom-built, non-linear process. Although the researcher begins with raw data (e.g., interview transcripts) and ends with an account of the major study findings, in between these two stages, researchers may circle through several facets of data analysis. In this way, data collection, data analysis, and writing are interrelated procedures and often occur simultaneously.

**Data management.** I audio-recorded all participant interviews and transcribed them verbatim. I used ExpressScribe software and an Infinity foot pedal to facilitate the transcription process. Interview transcripts were created in Microsoft Word. To prepare the data files for analysis, I removed any identifying information and assigned unique file identifiers to the interview transcripts. I also added a brief summary of participant characteristics to each data file. This included pertinent information not obtained in the demographic questionnaire such as family-of-origin social class and hometown

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<sup>3</sup> A code is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2009, p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> A theme is a pattern found in the information [data] that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii).

neighborhood racial composition. These data were used later in the analytic process to write case summaries and memos to help me determine to what extent mothers' perspectives and actions were linked to specific demographic characteristics or life course experiences.

**Preliminary analysis.** I began the analytic process with a preliminary analysis of fifteen interview transcripts. I read the interview transcripts multiple times in their entirety to “immerse [myself] in the details, and [try] to get a sense of the interview[s] as a whole” (Agar, 1980 as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 183). As I read the transcripts, I made comments in the margins using the comments feature in Microsoft Word (Patton, 2002). These comments included short phrases, ideas, and key concepts. In addition, I “pre-coded” the interview transcripts “by circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, and coloring rich and significant quotes or passages” (Saldana, 2009, p. 16) that were particularly striking to me as the data analyst.

Based on this preliminary analysis I formed five initial codes and reviewed the transcripts for evidence to support them. As a result, I was able to start to develop hunches about how race, class, and gender framed mothers' everyday lives. For example, one of the initial codes I created was based on an existing concept in the literature. I used the code *navigational capital* (Allen, 2012, p. 183) to identify the class-related resources that mothers and their families used to maneuver through institutional settings such as schools. However, although mothers' *navigational capital* was on full display in their accounts of the strategies they used to ensure their children's access to a high-quality education, several questions remained unanswered. I did not yet have a sense of how mothers deployed their resources, under what circumstances, and to what effect. Nor had

I ascertained how institutional actors responded to mothers' actions or to what extent differences in mothers' usage of a particular set of strategies varied based on the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body, faculty, and administration. It was clear that there was a more nuanced social process at work that would need to be examined in the subsequent phase of data collection and analysis.

To deepen my understanding of mothers' experiences more broadly, I conducted twenty-one additional interviews. These interviews allowed me to reflect on my initial ideas about the data, explore divergent experiences and contradictory points of view, and ask questions of the data not captured in the preliminary analysis. In the end, the complete data set included thirty-six interview transcripts.

**Coding Process.** I carefully read and reread the interview transcripts that comprised the complete data set and applied an open coding procedure to generate a list of inductive codes based on the raw interview data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I also generated codes deductively based on existing theories and research on African American motherhood and family racial socialization (Thomas, 2006). The next step was to read across mothers' interviews to identify interview passages that corresponded with each of the codes I developed. To facilitate this process, I used NVivo for Mac qualitative software to highlight the text segments that illustrated specific aspects of mothers' lived experiences such as meanings, emotions, attitudes, interactions, roles, inequalities, and behaviors. This procedure resulted in over 40 code files that contained passages from the interview transcripts that matched a particular code. These code files were between 1 and 64 single-spaced pages in length.

I then needed to aggregate the codes into a few general themes that could be further elaborated into sub-themes if appropriate. The goal was to reduce the overlap and redundancy among codes into a manageable set of themes that could inform the tentative assertions I would later put forth as my contribution to the literature. This stage of the coding process was labor-intensive and presented several unforeseen challenges. What follows is a description of how I translated codes into the themes and sub-themes that comprise the four results chapters of this dissertation thesis.

*Getting from codes to categories to themes.* As is often the case with qualitative data analysis, I had text segments that were labeled with more than one code. In part this was because participants often discussed two or more ideas in a given passage. It also was the case that getting from codes to themes would require an intervening step: categorization. In order to categorize the coded data, I carefully read each code file in its entirety and took notes on the issues discussed in the coded passages. At the conclusion of what was a painstaking analytic process, I discovered that some of the initial codes could be clustered together into categories. For example, the code - *racialized motherhood* - was used to label quotes and passages that explored mothers' efforts to cultivate their children's racial identity. And yet the inclusion of passages that described mothers' socialization messages and approaches within this code file rendered the *racial socialization* code redundant. In other words, racial socialization is a feature of racialized motherhood. As such, I created a new analytic category, *racialized mothering*, to denote the actions mothers took on behalf of their children. In turn, this category was comprised of three separate codes: *racial socialization*, *resistance strategies*, and *gendered racial*

*socialization*. This allowed me to create a separate document (“category file”) on *racialized mothering* for further analysis and theme building.

During this stage of the process I also discovered coded passages that were not relevant to the goals of the study. These codes were discarded and the coded passages associated with them were removed from the catalogue of primary code files, but saved in a separate document in case I needed to consult them at a later time.

Through a process of coding and recoding I was able to cluster several of my initial codes into new categories. Due to the sheer volume of data, I needed to develop a system to help me see how the coded and categorized data fit together. To do so, I grouped the code and category files by the main topical areas explored in mothers’ interviews. This approach kept me focused on the central research questions and major issues discussed in the interviews (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). One such topic was related to the extent to which mothers’ family decisions were influenced by dominant and cultural ideologies of motherhood. By focusing on this particular research concern, I realized that seven code files dealt specifically with issues related to how participants experienced contemporary motherhood. I then coded and recoded the quotes and passages within each code file to develop categories and, eventually, themes. Once I identified a few main themes I created a separate document that contained each theme and its relevant coded data passages. After two additional rounds of analysis (reading, note-taking, eliminating redundancy, refining themes, prioritizing and organizing quotes and passages for breadth and depth of illustration) I finally was able to identify the main themes and sub-themes that are presented in Chapter 4 as part of the results of this

dissertation research. I repeated this process over and over until I had accounted for all the remaining codes and categories.

**Data interpretation.** The final stage of analysis was to interpret the findings; that is, to extract meaning from the themes and sub-themes. This included an examination of social science constructs. Specifically, a primary goal of the interpretive process was to connect “the voices and stories of [participants] back to the set of historic, structural, and economic relations in which [participants] were situated” (Creswell, 2013, p. 216; see also Bowleg, 2008; Few-Demo, 2014).

**Presentation of findings.** The study findings are presented as stand-alone paragraph-length quotations, embedded quotations, vignettes, and synopses of mothers’ accounts. However, during the writing process, I realized that the coding process at times resulted in disembodied text segments that illustrated a particular issue, but were not sufficiently grounded. Therefore, in order to contextualize mothers’ words I returned to the interview transcripts and reviewed the narrative text that surrounded the quote or passage of interest.

In the write up of study results I do not provide frequency counts for the main themes represented in mothers’ narrative accounts. Creswell (2013) suggests that one of the limitations of this approach is that “a count conveys that all codes should be given equal emphasis, and it disregards that the passages coded may actually represent contradictory views” (p. 185). Instead, I use terms such as “most,” “majority,” “several,” “few,” and “rare” to give the reader a general sense of how widespread a particular issue, concern, or action was within the study sample but to avoid the intimation that the codes

that appeared more frequently in the data set were necessarily more meaningful or insightful than those that appeared less frequently.

**Memo-writing.** The purpose of writing analytic memos is for the researcher to reflect on the research process. In particular, it entails “thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see” (Mason, 2002, p. 5). I wrote analytic memos in Microsoft Word throughout all stages of the data analysis and dissertation writing process. Early on my memos focused on my relationship to the study participants and the phenomena under study. I also used the memo-writing process to explore my initial thoughts about the data, refine interview questions, and determine to what extent mothers’ accounts offered answers to my research questions. This stage of the memo-writing process coincided with the “pre-coding” phase of data analysis.

As data analysis proceeded, I created different types of memos. Memos were used to reflect on code choices and the process of aggregating codes into categories. I wrote extensively about how different categories or themes were related to existing paradigms. In the process, I was able to place my ideas in conversation with those articulated in previous research. As I entered the stage of data interpretation, my memos took the form of “think pieces” (Saldana, 2009, p. 39) that included quotes and coded passages, theme descriptions, interpretive explanations, and tables and diagrams created in Microsoft Word and Excel to help me visualize the social contexts in which mothers (and their families) were embedded. I inserted several of the passages from these “think pieces” into the final thesis write up. Finally, I created what I call “in progress” memos that changed



over time as I made new decisions about the organization and contents of the dissertation (Saldana, 2009).

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is an active, ongoing process of critical self-reflection that saturates every stage of the research process (Guillemin & Gillan, 2004). In particular, the term refers to the process in which the qualitative researcher is conscious of how their assumptions, values (e.g. political orientation), and social position in terms of race, class, gender, and other social categories of difference affect the research process (Creswell, 2013). In this dissertation project, I practiced reflexivity through writing field notes and memos. These periods of reflection helped me identify my potential biases and promoted frequent consideration of my “insider” and “outsider” status in relation to my study participants.

**Negotiating “insider” and “outsider” status.** The “insider” and “outsider” status of a qualitative researcher is not a fixed position. Rather, it is a status that shifts across contexts with varying implications for the research process. As an African American college-educated middle-class woman I shared a common identity, history, and culture with my informants. In the early stages of recruitment, my “insider” status helped me gain access to participants. In fact, several participants identified our shared identities as one of the reasons they were willing to discuss intimate details about their family lives with a stranger. But I was also an “outsider.”

From the beginning of the study I knew there would be “gradations of endogeny” (Nelson, 1996) between the participants and me that might create moments of misunderstanding. Furthermore, based on the accounts of African American female

qualitative researchers who have studied African American women's lived experiences, I was alert to the possibility that differences in family-of-origin social class, marital status, and sexuality could create distance in the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1999). It was less clear to me how other differences might impinge on the research process and shape my relationship with participants.

Initially, I was aware that differences in age and parental status would frame me as an "outsider" in relation to the respondents. However, in the interview process, I discovered that my ambiguous status as "not their daughter" and "not their peer" allowed me to elicit detailed accounts of interviewees' motherhood experiences. After all, how could I possibly know what it feels like to be an African American mother when I am not one? To better understand their experiences I would need to be brought into their social worlds. This often meant that mothers made an effort to provide comprehensive answers to my interview questions. My ambiguous status also created a unique interactional context in which mothers could reveal personal information about themselves in the form of "lessons learned" that they felt might benefit not only the research, but also me personally. Indeed, it was participants' broader commitment to guiding and supporting the next generation of African American women that made this research possible.

**Studying "up."** African American middle-class women occupy an ambiguous place in the U.S. social hierarchy. Black feminist scholars have used a dialectical frame to talk about the lived experience of African American women (Dill, 1979). For example, Collins (2007a) argued that one of the enduring themes of Black motherhood is the deep sense of maternal power and powerlessness that African American mothers negotiate as

they traverse different institutional and relational contexts. African American women have been both described as the “mule of the world” (Walker, 1983, p. 237) in Black feminist literary accounts of African American women’s position in American society, and celebrated within African American communities as “superwomen” because of their fortitude. Such contradictions present a quandary for thinking about what it means to study “up” or study elites.

Elites are usually leaders and experts in a community; they are persons who yield power, and such power is often intertwined with raced, classed, and gendered identities. The participants in this study did not have race or male privilege. We had this in common. However, I soon discovered that a narrow focus on the lack of such privileges and the tenuousness of middle-class status within Black American communities concealed the extent to which I was studying “up.” A sizable number of mothers in this study were fixtures in their communities where they accrued respect and held power. They were leaders of organizations and lobbied on behalf of the community and its interests in the public and private sectors. I did not possess such authority. In this regard, I was an “insider” and “outsider” studying “up.” The complexity of my researcher identity meant that much of the qualitative research methods literature was limited in its ability to help me understand what I experienced throughout the research process.

For example, the feminist research emphasis on giving “voice” to the marginalized was at times an imperfect metaphor. I interviewed many participants who were used to being asked about their thoughts and opinions on civil rights, politics, and community-based approaches to social and economic advancement. Many mothers had nuanced and carefully-worded responses to questions about contemporary race relations.

And yet it is also the case that this specific group of African American women and mothers has been erased conceptually and empirically in popular and academic discourse on African American family life and contemporary motherhood. Moreover, mothers' narrative accounts revealed the instances in mothers' everyday lives where they chose not to speak up to avoid charges of "hypersensitivity" and "playing the race card," underscoring the continued significance of race and gender despite their economic and social status. In the end, the recorded observations I made about my shifting "insider" and "outsider" positions helped me to see more clearly the paradoxical nature of participants' motherhood experiences at the intersections of race, class, and gender, and in turn, to better understand the strategies mothers enacted to navigate the multiple social environments that structured their daily lives.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness involves establishing the "accuracy" of the researcher's interpretations (Maxwell, 2005). In the present study, four techniques were used to enhance credibility: 1) triangulation, 2) debriefing sessions, 3) member checks, and 4) thick description. Triangulation is the use of different sources of information to shed light on a particular theme or perspective (Creswell, 2013). "Supporting data [was] obtained from [publicly accessible] documents [(e.g., organization mission statements, news stories, etc.)] to provide a background" to participant experiences as well as "verify particular details participants supplied" about the milieus in which their lives were embedded (Shenton, 2004, p. 66). Also when possible I examined any documents that respondents identified during the interviews as especially useful in their transition to motherhood and raising adolescents (e.g., parenting manuals, self help resources, etc.).

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I had frequent debriefing sessions with the IRB-designated principal investigator (i.e., my dissertation advisor) to discuss my developing ideas. These meetings helped me recognize how my own experiences and assumptions influenced what was perceptible (or imperceptible) to me in participants' accounts. These sessions led me to ask different questions of the data in order to uncover previously "hidden" meanings. Third, I relied on member-checks. These checks occurred "on the spot" in the course and at the end of interviews. As data collection and analysis proceeded, I also checked in with respondents for feedback on emergent themes and to clarify potential misunderstandings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, I included direct quotes, and when appropriate detailed descriptions, to illustrate specific themes/findings and to provide a sense of the thoughts and feelings that motivated mothers' actions. As such, the reader has an opportunity to see how the explanations, interpretations, and conclusions are grounded in the actual perspectives and situations described by participants.

### **Confidentiality and Protection of Participant Information**

Several IRB-approved procedures were employed to maintain the confidentiality of participants and protect the information they provided. These procedures included storing participant contact information such as phone numbers and email addresses in a secured location in the researcher's office. I only consulted these materials to schedule or cancel appointments. Electronic files including interview transcripts, memos, field notes, and audio recordings were saved on a password-protected computer to which only I had access. For the purpose of data analysis, all interview transcripts and intake forms were scrubbed of any identifying information and indexed using assigned identification

numbers. Paper records were kept in a locked file cabinet in the principal investigator's university office. This included signed consent forms and the demographic questionnaires administrated at the start of each interview.

Pseudonyms were (and will be) used in research presentations, the dissertation thesis, and all future reports and academic publications. As an additional precautionary measure, participants were advised to refrain from detailed discussion of their involvement in the study. Furthermore, each participant was given a copy of the signed consent form with contact information for the UConn Institutional Review Board in the event any questions or concerns arose about the ethics of the research.

### **Limitations**

The findings should be weighed against the study's limitations. First, because I enlisted the assistance of interviewees to recruit other participants ("snowball" technique) some of the mothers in the study were from similar social networks. Second, most participants resided in the Northeast region of the United States. Local histories of segregation and integration, as well as differences in regional economies continue to influence the overall social health of African American families. As such, the mothering experiences and socialization practices that are reported here may not fully capture the social and economic realities of African American middle-class mothers from other geographic regions. However, generalizability was not the objective of the present study. Rather, the aim was to contribute themes and concepts to the literature that may be applicable to other settings in which African American middle-class mothers reside (Saldana, 2009). Indeed, "[the] understanding of a phenomenon is gained gradually, through several studies, rather than one major project conducted in isolation" (Shenton,

2004, p. 71). Therefore, just as I was able to consult recent literature to enhance my understanding of mothers' lived experiences, so, too, was it my goal to produce knowledge that could be useful in future research.

## **Chapter 4: African American Middle-Class Mothers' Negotiation of Mothering Ideologies**

This chapter explores how African American middle-class mothers negotiate, manage, and resist socially determined notions of “good” mothering. Although all the mothers in this study had adolescent daughters at the time of the interview, I focus here on the broad issues that emerged as part of African American middle-class mothers’ transition to parenthood, including how mothers organized daily family life. In particular, I examine to what extent participants’ mothering practices were shaped by cultural<sup>5</sup> themes of African American motherhood, as well as their social class identities as mostly first- and second-generation middle-class women. In the process, I describe the influence of race and class segregation on the everyday experiences of African American middle-class mothers.

### **The Effects of Race, Class, and Gender on Mothering Ideologies<sup>6</sup> and Practices**

Sociologists Patricia Hill Collins (2007a), Shirley Hill (2005), Bart Landry (2000), Dawn Dow (2016a), and Anthropologist Riché Daniel Barnes (2016) have introduced frameworks to characterize African American women’s perspectives and experiences of motherhood. Captured in all of these theoretical frames are the multifaceted strategies that African American mothers have adapted over time to respond to the intersecting effects of race, class, and gender inequality on African American family life (Barnes, 2016). Traditionally, for African American women, there is no

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term culture to refer to “the symbols and values that create the ideological frame of reference through which people attempt to deal with the circumstances in which they find themselves” (Mullings, 1986, p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> Ideologies refer to the “different formal and informal, conscious and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, habits, assumptions, and commitments” of individuals (Dow, 2016a, p. 183).



ideological conflict between work and motherhood. Providing economically is considered to be a “duty of good mothers” (Dow, 2016a, p. 188) and has been vital to African American family survival and community development. In addition, the development of “institutions of community-based childcare” (Collins, 2007a, p. 278) within U.S. Black communities has allowed African American women to combine work with raising children. Indeed, women-centered kinship networks figure prominently in the collective memory of African American women as many witnessed first hand the material benefits of this type of social support.

Significantly, African American women’s social position as “culture bearers” is foundational to definitions of African American motherhood. African American women are expected to “teach the ways of the community by instilling pride, culture, and values as a means of individual survival” (Barnes, 2016, p. 3). This is a tall order given that destructive images of Black Americans pervade American culture. African American mothers and their families, then, must develop an extensive repertoire of identity management strategies that can be called upon to address any race-related challenges that may arise within the mainstream institutions that structure contemporary American family life. Even so, African American mothers are not a monolithic group. Mothers’ concerns and practices are influenced by “class-specific meanings, experiences, and inequities” (Elliott & Aseltine, 2012, p. 721). Likewise, the parental care work that African American mothers perform is “based on their perceptions of how others will view their children’s race, class, and gender” (Elliott & Aseltine, 2012, p. 721) in different social environments. As such, there is great variability in the strategies that African American mothers use to protect their children from racial harm.

In the following sections, I discuss the mothering perspectives and strategies of African American middle-class mothers. As Collins (2007a) observed, “just as the issues facing enslaved African mothers were quite different from those currently facing poor Black women in inner cities, for any given historical moment the actual institutional forms that these themes [ideologies] take depend on the severity of oppression and Black women’s resources for resistance” (p. 277). Thus, in order to more closely examine the meaning and experience of contemporary motherhood for African American middle-class mothers, I focus on three dimensions of family life: career decisions, childcare arrangements, and community connections.

### **“We Work”: Managing Expectations, Individual Desires, and Structural Realities**

The decision to work outside the home after having children was treated as a foregone conclusion for the majority of mothers in this study. The unspoken assumption was that mothers would be financially independent regardless of their marital status and family income. As Myra, a divorced mother of three, explained:

*I knew that I would always work. There was never a discussion about me staying home...having grown up with my mother and her sisters who worked...you go to work. Plus, if you go to a prestigious college, you don't stay home and raise babies, so I think that had a lot to do with it.*

Myra’s experience illuminates the pressures that African American professional women feel to be successful. Myra was third-generation middle-class. Her mother and grandmother had received advanced degrees. In fact, most participants reported that as young girls they received encouragement from their parents, teachers, and community members to attend college and become professionals. Being a well-educated professional woman facilitated upward mobility for first-generation middle-class mothers, and served as a buffer against downward mobility for mothers born into middle-class families.

Professional credentials also represent a form of capital for African American middle-class mothers in lieu of racial privilege and generational wealth. As a consequence, when mothers expressed a desire to modify their careers, such pronouncements often were met with suspicion and bewilderment.

For example, Pamela, a divorced mother of two, reported that none of the women and mothers in her extended family sympathized with her desire to spend more time at home with her daughters. Pamela described a common reaction:

*It was just like you do what you have to do. You have to work so that you can be comfortable and whatever...we have to do what we have to do. We work and men don't take care of us and you don't ever depend on a man to take care of you. You always have to have a back-up plan, and you just...you have a baby, but then you have to go back to work.*

In fact, in response to Pamela's eventual decision to take a lower-paying job due to the schedule flexibility it provided, Pamela was flatly told: "That's what white women do. That's not what we do." The message was clear: African American women work because there are no guarantees. Pamela's female relatives' admonishments also reflect concerns about the economic insecurity of many middle-class black families.

Even so, mothers' narratives indicated that some participants sought an expansive definition of African American motherhood that includes part-time employment and stay-at-home motherhood. For decades, African American women have been expected to "do it all" – work, raise children, care for intimate partners and extended family members, as well as promote the physical and cultural survival of U.S. Black communities. However, consistent with recent research, several respondents wanted to "move outside the 'strong Black woman' framework that required them to do it all" (Barnes, 2016, p. 6). Moreover, some mothers believed that the internalization of racist mythologies that characterize all

African American men as unreliable partners and co-parents perpetuated gender inequality and threatened family stability. To this end, participants' narratives suggested that cultural ideologies are not always compatible with personal desires or the structural realities of some middle-class African American mothers and their families.

When I asked Audrey, a married mother of two, how she navigated expectations that African American mothers work, she said:

*It happened to be the church that we went to talked about that being OK. Everybody doesn't have to have a [career] or be aggressive, not aggressive, but feel like you have to work, you have to have a job, you have to kind of do the superwoman thing, like don't feel that pressure, you can do both or one or whatever.*

But this message from "the pulpit" was in stark contrast to the response Audrey received from other people in her social network. Audrey explained:

*People still, I think, even to this day don't understand it. I definitely felt after coming out of grad school the expectation is that you're supposed to be working, making a certain kind of money, living a certain lifestyle that type of thing, so definitely felt it [disapproval] from peers and other people. And then family members certainly were like, 'You're not working? Why aren't you working?'*

Despite others' disapproval the public endorsement of stay-at-home motherhood by the African American pastor of Audrey's church gave her confidence in her decision to leave the workforce.

Sonya, a married mother of two, offered a different perspective from Audrey on the issue of stay-at-home motherhood. Sonya explained that her initial interest in staying home was tied to her career trajectory. She had worked for over fifteen years as a business executive before the birth of her first child. As she put it, "I was ready for something different." Sonya was not alone amongst mothers who delayed having children until their mid-30s and early 40s. Vanessa, a married mother of one, decided to leave her

career and stay home full-time. When I asked Vanessa what factored into her decision she gently reminded me that she had a successful career in higher education prior to getting married and “enjoyed being at home for a change.” Besides, Vanessa’s husband had a lucrative career and fully supported her decision to stay home with their daughter.

For other mothers, the desire to stay home was influenced by their childhood experiences. Finding herself in a different economic position than previous generations of women in her family, Cynthia, a married mother of two, stayed home for the first few years of her oldest daughter’s life. Cynthia reflected on the reasons behind her decision:

*I just wanted to lay a really good foundation for [her], and I felt like my parents were teenagers, so as soon as my mom had me she went right back to school. And I always just thought when I have kids I really want to spend their formative years kind of with them, making sure they get everything they need. So that’s why, you know, I just decided that I need to stay home with my kids as long as I can.*

Pamela, a divorced mother of two, echoed this sentiment. Pamela’s decision to flex her schedule was influenced by her experience growing up with a mother who worked full-time in part to offset the financial insecurity that accompanied her father’s entrepreneurial pursuits. She explained:

*I think one of the greatest rewards [of motherhood] is that pretty much since they’ve been born I’ve been able to sort of create a situation where I don’t have to put my job first, where I can still have a job and a profession, but my children come first. I still have space and room for them. I mean when I was a little girl, my mother’s job came first and there was no question about that. I’ve been able to do that differently and I’m proud of that.*

Pamela expressed gratitude for the sacrifices her mother made in order to provide a better life for her and her siblings. Yet, Pamela still felt that her mother was often inaccessible, emotionally and physically. A flexible work schedule, then, made it possible for Pamela to provide her daughters with the sort of support she yearned for as a child.

There were other hidden benefits associated with family-friendly workplace policies. Evelyn, a married mother of two, is a corporate executive at a Fortune 500 company. Despite Evelyn's demanding career, Evelyn said that she was fortunate to have a position where she could set her own schedule. According to Evelyn, this was especially important because "...when they're [children are] younger you worry about their days and how they're doing because this town is not very diverse..." Because Evelyn could work from home she was able to monitor her children's interpersonal interactions with their peers and teachers for signs of racial discrimination.

Like Evelyn, the majority of mothers in this study worked full-time. However, most participants were not employed by organizations that had family-friendly work environments. Instead, mothers and their spouses were left alone to find private solutions to manage their work and family responsibilities. Although nearly all mothers reported that they were exhausted from managing their daily responsibilities, a few participants openly questioned whether it was even desirable to try to do and have it all in the first place. Myra, a divorced mother of three, opined:

*The challenge is trying to have it all, because women are supposed to have it all. You hear it – Lean In<sup>7</sup>, right? You can't. Not at the same time. But trying to have it all, and I think especially as a black woman who's gone to a prestigious college, the pressure is to be successful, right? ...You're gonna produce successful kids. Your kids are not gonna go bag groceries. There's that expectation of not only doing better than your parents did, but your children have to do better than you did. And they have to keep it going. I'm not sure all cultures look at their kids that same way. They just may want their kids to be successful. And so I think there's too much*

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<sup>7</sup> *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* is the 2013 New York Times bestselling book written by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and Founder of LeanIn.org. In *Lean In* Sandberg offers advice to women in male-dominated professions on work, motherhood, and how to climb the corporate ladder. Upon its release, Sandberg was roundly praised though she received some criticism for the inattention to race and class in her analysis.

*pressure to both excel as a black professional and as a black parent and still find time for yourself.*

The need to produce successful kids was a factor in mothers' decisions to climb the corporate ladder. To a certain extent, mothers' professional success served as an example for their children and the society as a whole. Promotions also usually provided some level of autonomy and increased compensation. This was critical for the non-partnered mothers in the study who were raising children on their own with limited outside financial support. It simply was not possible for them to "opt out" of paid employment. For mothers in dual-earner households a higher family income improved their family's ability to keep pace with the economic costs associated with raising affluent children in a competitive society.

To be sure, mothers remained employed for other reasons as well. Many mothers enjoyed their careers and derived great satisfaction from the work they did. Equally as significant, mothers had invested a lot of time in their education and career and did not want to exit the workforce before they achieved certain milestones. But, as Myra suggests, mothers were under an incredible amount of pressure to meet a certain standard of excellence in all areas of their lives. Participants were acutely aware that the continued social progress of Black Americans was tied not only to their individual success, but also to that of their families. Far from an outright rejection of cultural traditions, Myra's narrative account, similar to those of other mothers in the study, made visible the ideological and structural constraints that African American middle-class mothers contend with as they balance their personal interests, career goals, and familial responsibilities.

### **Childcare Arrangements: Reimagining Kin Care**

African American mothers' engagement in the labor market, historically, and up to today, has been made possible, in part due to the reliance on kin and fictive kin for child care assistance. However, recent social shifts in the United States have led to disruptions in this pattern of care. Like most professionals, African American professional women are delaying marriage and childbirth (Barnes, 2016; Yang & Morgan, 2003). In addition, the pursuit of educational and occupational opportunities critical to social mobility has taken mothers and their families away from the communities, neighborhoods, and churches in which they grew up. All members of the professional class are impacted by this trend but there have been unique outcomes for African American families.

A delay in motherhood has meant that the great-grandmothers, grandmothers and aunts central to African American extended families are older and may not be able to watch after young children or chauffeur them around to different enrichment activities (i.e., play dates, music classes, swim lessons, etc.). This was true for Sonya, a married mother of two, and business executive at a technology firm. Sonya's grandmother provided care for the first year of her children's lives but after that Sonya placed them in daycare full-time. Sonya explained: "Once they're a year or so, they need to start socializing, and you can't be home with an old person."

Age at motherhood also appeared to influence how participants understood their identities as mothers within their extended kin networks. The few participants who became mothers as teenagers usually described their mothers as co-parents or surrogate parents to their children. For these participants, the matrifocal family model was essential to their entry into the middle class. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, and cousins



often supported participants and their male partners as they completed their education. In contrast, Beverly, an adoptive mother of one, identified as a single parent despite the fact that she lived in a three-generation household. One possible explanation for the difference in how mothers constructed their identities is that the adaptive strategy of kin care used by young mothers where maternal grandmothers parent their grandchildren is facilitated by the fact that the generations are closer together temporally (Apfel & Seitz, 1991). This relationship may function differently among older first-time mothers. In Beverly's case even though her mother provided instrumental and emotional support, because Beverly was "sandwiched" between two generations, she felt responsible for both her mother and daughter.

For the black professional class, "[m]igrations due to educational and career advancement opportunities" often disrupt connections to extended family and "fragment communal support" (Barnes, 2016, p. 60). Many mothers voiced a desire to be near their relatives, especially their mothers, as they made the transition to motherhood. For some mothers, their mother-in-law filled this void if they lived near their husband's family-of-origin. But several mothers and their families lived away from all extended family members. Vanessa, a married mother of one, did not know anyone when, as a newlywed, she moved out of state to join her husband. Although she could depend on her sister-in-law when she needed a babysitter, Vanessa wanted to be around her extended family during the first year of her daughter's life. "I'm going to tell you the truth, Angela [daughter] and I flew back and forth. They called her the traveling baby because I felt like I needed the support," Vanessa said. Vanessa wanted to be around her grandmother, mother, brothers, sisters, and cousins. She recalled: "It was hard, I think, on my husband.

It was hard for us. But, at the time, he went along with it. I think he knew I needed that, and that I needed some support.” For Vanessa, her trips back home had less to do with childcare needs, as she stayed home full-time. But, as a new mother, she wanted to be surrounded by family, and with the demands of her husband’s profession, going back to visit family in her hometown offered the emotional and communal support she needed.

Unlike Vanessa, most mothers were not in a position to travel back home regularly or move their relatives into their homes. They had to build communities of support where they lived. Importantly, these communities served multiple functions. Women-centered kin networks, in addition to the provision of childcare, also are socialization agents for African American children. In this way, childcare decisions are not simply work-family strategies to support African American middle-class mothers’ paid work outside the home. They are parenting decisions. Caregivers influence the social-emotional, cognitive, and cultural development of children. For African American middle-class mothers in this study being away from family meant that they needed to find childcare assistance that addressed all these dimensions of child development.

For example, in lieu of extended family, April, a married mother of two, and her husband sent their children to a local Afrocentric daycare program. According to April, part of what attracted them to the daycare was that it was run by African American educators and followed a curriculum that emphasized African American history and culture. Specifically, by seeking out caregivers who were women of color, mothers in this study tried to protect their children early on from racist encounters. Several mothers also suggested that, culturally, women of color would understand the need to nurture their

children's self-esteem. Maxine, a married mother of four, echoed this sentiment when she described the process of hiring a live-in nanny:

*We wanted somebody black, we wanted a black female. 'Cause we wanted this cultural thing. We were without our family. My mother wasn't here...he was away from his parents and family. We were isolated...so we wanted somebody who was going to not have us have to recreate community in our home about that layer of blackness and culture.*

Maxine, a married mother of four and entrepreneur, grew up in a small town shrouded in the love of her family and community. In discussing how she handled racism growing up, Maxine said, "you were supposed to tell the community when there was an injustice, so you could get strength and shored up by others." This sense of compassion and unconditional love was what Maxine hoped to provide her children. For Maxine, the decision to only hire women of color was based on the fact that because their ethnic identity marked them as Other she felt they were more likely to understand the challenges her children would face. Maxine felt culturally connected to the women who helped raise her children. Furthermore, Maxine did not view having nannies as an abdication of maternal responsibility. Rather, from Maxine's vantage point, raising children was a communal endeavor. As she put it, "being a parent is not something that can be taught, but it can be nurtured and shared."

**Confronting "privilege" in the employer-employee relationship.** Despite a tradition of community-based childcare within African American families and communities, not everyone shared Maxine's view. Domestic help seemed at odds with the meanings many African American women attach to motherhood. The issue of domestic help revealed the ways that middle-class and upper-middle class African American mothers attempt to balance their investment in cultural family ideologies with

their desire or need to take advantage of the opportunities that come with their social class status. Victoria's discomfort was palpable when she talked about the need to hire housekeepers. Victoria, a married mother of three, explained:

*I did have to hire, and never imagined that I would, but people who would clean my house, because I just couldn't do it. ...It was an immigrant couple, and it was a male and a female who came to clean. So issues around privilege came up for me, privilege in a way I've never known privilege. Like, I'm paying someone to clean my house. And I didn't like that.*

Victoria recognized that she needed the support. However, this reality did not diminish the unease she felt.

To moderate what mothers perceived as a somewhat awkward relationship, participants often tried to re-conceptualize their social position in relation to the in-home caregivers they employed. Shirley, a divorced mother of four, talked about her nannies as fictive kin. In addition, mothers recounted instances in which they used their professional connections and economic resources to help their nannies and au pairs. This included helping with immigration-related issues, payment for medical procedures, and access to educational opportunities for their children.

There are different ways to interpret mothers' actions. One interpretation is that mothers are reminded of a time when African American women worked as domestics in the homes of class privileged white women for menial wages and under hostile conditions. As such, mothers may have felt compelled to go above and beyond when they hired black women and other women of color to care for their children. At the same time, occupying a privileged identity was uncharted territory for the majority of mothers in this study. First, most mothers grew up in working-class and lower-middle-class families. Second, as African American women, participants had achieved their middle-class status

without access to race and male privilege. In order to reconcile the class politics involved in hiring domestic care workers, it appears that several mothers wanted to see themselves and the women they employed as mothers and othermothers in collective struggle instead of women with competing economic interests based on their differences in class position and immigrant status.

### **Community Connections: The Significance of Black Social Spaces**

The career and childcare strategies that mothers used were critical to how participants managed their transition to motherhood. In particular, these strategies revealed the myriad ways that mothers attempted to create positive environments for their children. As part of this process, several participants also exerted considerable time and effort to build connections with other African American families. As Patricia, a married mother of two, explained:

*I think you just get tired of being the only black person in a white room every time you go some place, [to the] supermarket, your kids' school, to work. It's like you feel judged all the time and your kid is judged all the time.*

Certainly to feel under constant surveillance took a toll on mothers and their families. In the workplace mothers were doubly stigmatized based on their race and gender. Several mothers recounted incidents of gendered racism at the hands of their employers and colleagues. Specifically, mothers described the strategies they enacted in order to be recognized as intelligent and competent professionals in the workplace. At the same time, as mothers pursued culturally-affirming childcare arrangements, they were confronted with the class tensions involved in purchasing the domestic services of other women of color. Alternatively, when children were left in the care of white caregivers and educators, mothers felt compelled to closely monitor these interactions.

The stress that mothers reported was further exacerbated by the fact that many lived in predominantly white neighborhoods. As a result, several mothers sought out black social spaces. Like previous generations, for participants in this study, black social spaces offered respite from the subtle indignities that mothers and their families endured within mainstream social institutions. In particular, African American family organizations provided a source of identity coherence for African American middle-class mothers and their families due to the race and class similarity of participants. Shirley, a divorced mother of four, put it this way: “You live in these towns that are predominantly white, you want your children to be exposed to some culturally enriching activities around people like them.” Toward this end, African American family organizations nurtured raced and classed identities that mirrored the experience of middle-class African Americans.

**Creating culturally affirming social support networks.** In all, mothers and their families participated in several religious, civic, and social organizations, including *Jack and Jill*. The decision to enroll in *Jack and Jill*,<sup>8</sup> a membership organization of mothers with children from ages 2 to 9, was largely shaped by mothers’ immediate social environments, as most mothers had not been members as children. April, a married mother of two, explained:

*When I grew up I wasn’t in Jack and Jill. It wasn’t necessary for me because my environment was a lot of black students, so I didn’t have to worry about interacting with black people growing up because everybody*

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<sup>8</sup>Karyn Lacy (2006) provides this description of *Jack and Jill*: “Founded by a group of upper-middle-class African American mothers in 1938, Jack and Jill’s original mission was to provide upper-middle-class black children between the ages of two and nineteen with the educational, cultural, and social experiences traditionally reserved for upper-middle-class white children” (p. 923). Membership is by invitation only, with the exception of “legacy” membership.

*was black pretty much. Here, I did want to get more involved...just cause I wanted her to meet more black kids cause her school was not diverse at all, so this was a way for her to get to see kids like her that are doing good things.*

For April, part of the appeal of this particular organization was the opportunity it provided for her daughter and son to develop friendships with other African American youth. Membership in the organization also meant that mothers and their families could spend time with families that shared their “values and lifestyles.” When asked what attracted her to the organization, Maureen, a mother of one, remarked: “I knew she would be going to a school in [a predominantly white district]... I wanted to make sure that she would have a community of black friends who had similar values and aspirations as we do.” Embedded in Maureen’s narrative was the desire to be surrounded by African American families from similar backgrounds.

In general, mothers would not comment on the social class status of other families in the organization. Instead, mothers discussed the types of opportunities their children were afforded due to membership. Melanie, a married mother of one, remarked:

*The thing that I love about Jack and Jill is what it does for the children...the programming that we put together... and they get to see professionals of color that they don’t often get to see...so I wanted my daughter to know that there are professionals of color doing everything in the world and Jack and Jill does that beautifully. And it has a wonderful network for her across the country that she will have access to as she gets older so that I like. The thing I do love as a mom is being with other moms who are committed to giving their kids good quality of life and a good childhood so that’s a nice part of it.*

In this quote Melanie is careful not to draw a direct link between social class and childrearing approaches. Mothers were exceptionally careful not to imply that only middle-class African American parents cared about their children or sought to provide them with a good childhood. Still mothers recognized that their class resources made it

possible for them to create opportunities for their children that remain largely out of reach for the majority of lower-income families.

To that end, a few mothers did discuss the history of the organization and its reputation of elitism. Myra, a third-generation college graduate, originally, did “not want to have anything to do with it” and her husband was opposed to membership because, as she explained, “he thought it was that bougie<sup>9</sup> group.” Of note, Myra’s view echoed her mother’s perspective. Myra elaborated:

*To be honest, because my grandparents were physicians back in the ‘50s the thing for blacks who were professionals was to get their kids in Jack and Jill. My mother and her sisters were not [in it]. And my mother [was] dead set against it. She did not want me in anything bougie. She wanted me to be grounded and down to earth because the perception was that those folks thought they were above other black folks.*

However, in the end, Myra had a positive experience once she joined the organization. Of note, the screening process for membership is far less restrictive now and varies by chapter location. Likewise, today, the membership is more diverse in terms of the class background of members’ families-of-origin (Graham, 2009). Even so, mothers still have to be sponsored by current members. As one might expect, with this sort of network-based model of recruitment, mothers are most likely to select women like themselves. Consequently, the organization continues to be a black social space that is bounded by class. Yet, despite ongoing discussions about the extent to which such spaces may reproduce class inequalities within African American communities, mothers in this study, by and large, acknowledged the importance of these organizations, especially for

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<sup>9</sup> According to David West Brown (2006) *bougie* is part of the African American English lexicon. It is most often meant to signify class (i.e. bourgeoisie) (p. 604). Being *bougie* is thinking you are better than everyone else, and in this particular case, seeing yourself as superior to other African Americans, especially those of lesser means.



families that reside in white neighborhoods. As Selena, a married mother of three, who was not a member of *Jack and Jill*, opined:

*It feels elitist, but I understand the purpose. Because then what is [my daughter's] social group? It's random. It's family friends, it's some cousins, but they're far away. It's the kids at her school. And, so, for a black girl in some ways...she has her feet in all of these different worlds and she doesn't have like a community that's very validating in some ways.*

In addition to the educational, social, and cultural opportunities the organization offered mothers' children, *Jack and Jill* provided a social support network for middle-class African American mothers. Significantly, some mothers felt that *Jack and Jill* was one of the few spaces where they could voice their opinions and receive validation. Several mothers stated that they would not broach certain topics with the white mothers of their children's friends. For example, Elizabeth (a married mother of two) reflected on a recent viral video of a fifteen-year-old African American girl being body-slammed by a police officer in a South Carolina classroom:

*I don't even know if I could talk to somebody white about that because if they came at it from the wrong perspective; it would just be a difficult conversation, right? At least you can hope that if you're talking to black parents, black moms, that you have a similar perspective. You can brainstorm. You can strategize. You can get some advice – your kids went to private school, how'd you deal with this or that or this other thing...or maybe it's the same school, maybe it's not – whatever it is – you can be fairly, kind of, not one-hundred percent, but that the perspective will be the same and that you can get some good advice.*

In part, Elizabeth was attracted to an organization like *Jack and Jill* because she did not have to censor herself. She could openly discuss her concerns as a parent. Membership in an African American family organization meant that mothers and their families were not alone. They could draw on the talents, skills, and connections of other families to the benefit of their own children. Indeed, at times mothers and their spouses served as

mentors, tutors, and coaches to member children. Every parent was a community “othermother” (or “otherfather”) to someone’s son or daughter. In this space, there was an overwhelming sense that regardless of class position or family structure it still takes a “village” to raise healthy and successful African American children in a racialized society.

## **Conclusion**

African American middle-class mothers often find themselves trying to reconcile cultural definitions of African American motherhood with their present-day social and economic realities. Indeed, it appears that the social, legal, and economic progress that African Americans experienced in the post civil rights era has led to the development of new family patterns. Because of the relative invisibility of African Americans in dominant discourse on the American middle class the impact of societal changes on African American middle-class families has been understudied. Yet Riché Daniel Barnes (2016) suggests that recent social shifts have caused a significant disruption in the communal approach to motherhood and parenthood that has existed for generations within African American communities. As a consequence, African American middle-class mothers are creating and testing new strategies to manage their work and family responsibilities, nurture their children’s racial and cultural identities, and preserve their social connections to other African Americans.

## **Chapter 5: African American Middle-Class Mothers' Educational Care Work**

In the previous chapter, I described how African American middle-class mothers manage cultural definitions of African American motherhood. In this chapter, I explore how African American middle-class mothers negotiate their raced, classed, and gendered position as middle-class parents. Because “formal schooling has become a necessity for preparing children with the skills and characteristics required of a citizen in the modern nation-state,” (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p. 267), mothers’ efforts to ensure that their children had access to a high-quality education were a principal focus of their mothering activities. Of note, in addition to an emphasis on school selection and academic success, mothers’ strategic engagement in their daughters’ education included protection and guidance. As such, I frame respondents’ school-related mothering practices as ‘educational care work’<sup>10</sup> (Golden & Erdreich, 2014) to capture the multifaceted nature of mothers’ educational achievement strategies.

### **Race, Class, and Mothering in Context: Navigating Educational Opportunity in America**

As part of the transition to motherhood, participants (and their husbands) were faced with making decisions about where and how to raise their children. At the same time, as middle-class parents, the mothers in the present study had to negotiate dominant ideologies of middle-class motherhood that are embedded in and support the structure and organization of the American education system. Generally, middle-class parents are expected to pass on their cultural capital to the next generation (Lareau, 2003). Yet

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<sup>10</sup> Deborah Golden and Lauren Erdreich (2014) introduced the concept, ‘educational care work,’ as part of their proposed analytical approach “to the study of the ways in which women’s engagement in their children’s education shape mothers, mothering, and motherhood” (p. 272). Within this model, *educational care work* is reflective of “cultural conceptions of competent mothering and proper child development” (p. 270).

“cultural capital is not merely transferred passively from parents to children through socialization; it is also transmitted purposively, through the actions and investments of parents” (Kimelberg, 2014, p. 210). This is where middle-class parents often have an advantage. Middle-class parents are usually in a better position to perform the ‘complementary educational work’ (Griffith & Smith, 2005) required by schools (e.g., homework help, skills training, etc.) and may experience greater confidence in their interactions with school professionals (Lareau, 2002). As such, middle-class parents are able to navigate educational institutions in ways that tend to benefit them and their children.

Recently, scholars have begun to examine how African American middle-class parents prepare their children to reproduce their social class position. Previous studies have assumed that the privileges associated with middle-class status accrue the same advantages across race (Lacy, 2007). Like African American middle-class parents in prior studies, most of the mothers in my study did not endorse this view. Many respondents viewed racism as a fact of American social life, and did not believe that their middle-class status would protect them or their children from racial discrimination. Accordingly, mothers felt they had to remain vigilant in their efforts to ensure their children had equal access to middle-class opportunities and were treated as individuals and not based on racial stereotypes within mainstream institutions. This meant that African American middle-class mothers had to provide their children with a multi-purpose and multi-dimensional “toolkit” of resistance strategies.

Indeed, Myra, a mother of three, captured the tensions involved in African American middle-class mothers' educational care work in response to a question about her transition to motherhood:

*You're coming into motherhood as all mothers do, but you're coming into black motherhood, there's a difference. Motherhood generally is appreciating that beautiful little face looking at you and seeing the world through their eyes as they're growing up. So, you can still do the little mommy groups and the play groups...you can still be a part of the PTA and room moms and that whole world of mothers. But there's this other part that those folks [white mothers] don't have to experience. So, we still have the same common concerns about the child's health and their development and, you know, transitioning into school and doing well...we share those same commonalities with all mothers. But there's the additional, I think, pressure of making sure that they [children] understand the positives of their culture...that yes, you are good, you're great, you can do that test, you can do whatever it is you want to do in that classroom, you raise your hand, speak up, but understand because of the way this country's evolved...there's that perception. Your job is to not let them validate a perception. There's so many more things that you have to think of because of the way the world perceives and treats you, and you don't want your child to be mistreated when you're not there.*

Similar to other respondents, Myra felt that part of her mothering included cultivating a positive racial identity and knowledge of African American culture; teaching her children how to effectively decode, manage, and challenge racism; and supporting her children as they developed their own resistance strategies. Of note, Myra's quote suggests that the process of African American middle-class social mobility requires action from parents – in this case mothers - *and* their children. Although mothers often assume considerable responsibility in schooling decisions, African American children also must find ways to successfully negotiate the race, class, and gender politics of U.S. schools.

In the following sections, I explore this parallel process in further depth by highlighting how mothers managed their adolescent daughters' educations from the early

years to the present. In particular, I discuss the factors that influenced mothers' approaches to the school selection process, including the metrics that mothers used to determine what kind of school environment would support their daughters' achievement. Then I examine how school professionals responded to mothers as they attempted to marshal their class-based resources. Prior studies demonstrate that as a resource, cultural capital, only accrues social advantages for children if families choose to use it *and* are able to activate it successfully (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). However, the effective deployment of cultural capital also depends on whether educators view parents' actions as reasonable – a perception that can be influenced by implicit bias. Thus, I conclude with a description of the educational guidance that mothers provided to their daughters as part of mothers' broader efforts to raise daughters able to persevere despite obstacles to their achievement.

### **School Selection Process: School Quality and Racial Diversity**

Sociologist Karyn Lacy (2007) has argued that “securing the best possible education for their children is a defining feature of the suburban middle class” (p. 187). It is part of the concerted cultivation approach to raising children. African American middle-class parents are no different in this regard. They also want their children to attend high-performing schools in order to make them competitive in the marketplace of secondary schools and college admissions. But, for many African American middle-class parents, schools are not seen as racially neutral spaces. As one mother in my study remarked: “I have to be very strategic about where I place my kids.”

African Americans are acutely aware that increased access to educational opportunities comes with its own set of costs. Indeed, many mothers talked about their

experience with school integration and the social dynamics they learned to negotiate along the way. Mothers' encounters with tokenism, discrimination, and glass ceilings spanned from elementary school to graduate school and later followed many of them into the workplace. Mothers' coping strategies varied, as did their sense of otherness as African American girls and women within predominantly white institutions.

Most mothers anticipated that their daughters, too, would experience racism and sexism at some point during their education. It was considered par for the course. In part, mothers' certainty that their daughters would encounter race and gender discrimination was based on their personal experience. In addition, some respondents – prior to their transition to motherhood – heard stories from friends who recounted horrific experiences they had with teachers and administrators at their children's schools. In turn, early on mothers' educational care work included efforts to structure their daughters' school environments in ways that would protect them from, or at least militate against, the psychological and academic costs of discrimination.

**Managing school environments.** In their pursuit of a high-quality education for their daughters, many mothers came face-to-face with the race and class segmentation that characterizes American schools. Several mothers and their families moved to affluent suburban communities in order to access high-performing public school districts. However, this also meant that their children ended up attending predominantly white schools due to persistent residential and school segregation in the United States. Other mothers lived in racially integrated, mixed-income neighborhoods but sent their children to private or charter schools with predominantly white and Asian student populations. In the end, despite the fact that diversity was an important metric of school quality for many

study participants, most mothers' daughters went to schools that had little racial and ethnic diversity.

Although mothers chose schools based on conventional metrics such as test scores, school rankings, academic rigor, and college placements, nearly all participants preferred schools that would also nurture their daughters' social and emotional development. In particular, mothers used a 'goodness-of-fit' (Belsky, 1984) standard when choosing a school for their daughters. Vanessa, a married mother of one, described the school choice process as follows:

*I could tell Jessica was real creative, and she has this curious mind. And Oak Ridge Private School seemed like a place that would allow her to explore, and to create, and to just develop whatever it was inside of her. Not a structured way of learning so much, and I just felt well this is who this child is. It's the kind of place that they find something special in every child, and they encourage and support that. And in the areas where you might have a weakness they provide you with support in those areas as well.*

For some mothers, their evaluation of a school's 'fit' also included considerations about racial safety<sup>11</sup>, though mothers enacted different strategies in order to structure their daughters' learning environments. When Elizabeth and her husband decided to send their daughter to private school she intentionally sought out a school that already had black faculty and black families as part of its community. After Selena's son's traumatic experience attending the local suburban high school, Selena and her husband decided to

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<sup>11</sup> Lyn Uttal (1998) used the term, 'racial safety,' to describe the concern of mothers of color that their young children might become targets of racism within predominantly white child care settings. In addition, 'racial safety' encompassed mothers' concerns about whether white caregivers were "culturally competent," and therefore able to negotiate cross-race and cross-ethnic social relations, as well as validate minority children's cultural histories and identities in the day care classroom (p. 605).



send their daughter to private school. Indeed, Selena felt that sometimes private schools “do diversity and inclusion better”:

*Like there are incidents that may come up with other families and kids, people might say things, but [there's] this general feeling that everyone's paying and they can get rid of teachers real quick, and, so, your kid is just treated so much better. And, even if they're making assumptions about your family, they kind of don't. First of all, they're less likely to because they're used to see[ing]...a little more diversity of black families, so they're less likely to [make assumptions. And, then, they're very conscientious about the affinity groups...like, in a private school, your kid is getting that right away.*

In some ways, school-based cultural affinity groups operated as black social spaces where daughters could spend time with other African American students. Significantly, these spaces were not simply a place where students sought shelter from racial discrimination. Rather, cultural affinity groups also functioned as ‘identity construction sites’ (Lacy, 2007) where students’ cultural identities could be affirmed.

Indeed, the issue of racial safety led some mothers to request for their daughters to be placed in classrooms with other African American students whenever possible.

Cynthia explained:

*I had to fight every year to make sure she wasn't the only black kid in her class. Every year they look for a letter from me saying I did not want her to be the only person in class that all the kids looked to for questions about, you know, black people.*

For Cynthia, the need to address the lack of racial and ethnic diversity at her daughter’s school was at the center of her advocacy from the very beginning. For other mothers in the study, concern about classroom diversity emerged over time. Vera described how the issue unfolded at her daughter’s first elementary school:

*I started to be concerned about the number of kids of color...At this school, maybe there was four black kids - they're the same age. At a Montessori [school] they're mixed ages, so first, second, third [grade] in*

*one classroom. But [daughter] was in one [classroom], this other [black] boy was in one, you know, so I say why don't you put them all in the same classroom. And she [administrator] said, 'Well, we want everyone to have an experience...' 'So, you wanted to use my kid as a testing for white kids to get to know black people?' ...I don't think so, so the next year they were all in the same [classroom]. I said: 'I don't want you experimenting with my kid.'*

Vera's experience illustrates the ambivalence that some mothers felt about when and how to approach issues of diversity and inclusion. It also suggests that there is a tendency for schools to place the desires of white students and their families (e.g., interracial exposure and contact) over concerns parents of color may have about their children's physical isolation from other members of their racial or ethnic group. In the cases above, both Cynthia and Vera advocated for putting the African American students together in the same classroom as a way to address the underrepresentation of African Americans at their daughter's school.

Importantly, mothers' concerns about racial microaggressions were not unfounded. Vera's daughter had an elementary school classmate proclaim his hatred of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Jackie reported that her daughter (and other children) were frequently called "brownies" by their white classmates and constantly asked why they had hair like a dog. These types of incidents started when daughters were in elementary school and continued into high school. Peers were not the sole offenders, however. Mothers recounted stories of teachers who made racially insensitive comments. Cherise shared a particularly egregious example. Her daughter, Toni, was the only African American student in her high school English class. In speaking about the repeated use of the word *nigger* in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the teacher reportedly gave students permission to use the term in their classroom discussion because there were

no African Americans present. The teacher reportedly failed to acknowledge Toni's presence until other students in the class voiced their alarm and disapproval. To Cherise, the teacher's actions further underscored the invisibility and marginalization of African American female students within predominantly white educational settings. Although the administration ultimately responded to the incident in a satisfactory manner, an entire year passed before the teacher offered what Cherise considered a sincere apology for what she had done.

Maternal concerns also focused on more subtle forms of discrimination. For example, mothers reported discomfort with how some teachers talked about school diversity. Alana and her family decided to take advantage of an educational opportunity program that allowed children who lived in cities to attend suburban schools. For the most part, Alana and her family had great experiences with the teachers at the suburban schools her daughters attended from elementary through high school. But early on Alana was mortified when her oldest daughter, Nia, was identified by her teacher as an educational opportunity student to a group of parents. Alana recounted the incident:

*I'll never forget the teacher. We went for Open House and this was for the second grade for my daughter – and really nice teacher - I remember the teacher saying...she was talking to the classroom [of] parents and she said we sort of have student representatives and they are the voice of the students...and it's student elected. And the students chose Meredith and Nia – and Nia is our educational opportunity student.*

As soon as the Open House ended, Alana and her husband decided to speak with the teacher privately to address the incident. Alana recalled saying to her,

*I'm curious why you would label Nia as an educational opportunity student versus a student? Nia is a student like all the other students. One of the things we don't do is we don't box our children in. We don't label our children.*

According to Alana, the teacher apologized and reiterated that Nia was fabulous. Interestingly, earlier in her interview, Alana stated that she did not consider racial diversity an important factor in choosing schools for her daughters. In fact, Alana stood out in the study as one of a few mothers who cautiously endorsed a color-blind racial ideology. For instance, Alana scoffed at the idea of giving her daughters a “pep talk” to prepare them for racial bias at their predominantly white suburban schools. Alana and her husband did not want to “set them up for experiences they might not have.”

Even so, Alana’s intervention with Nia’s second-grade teacher demonstrated her concern about how social difference was treated in the classroom. Statistically, most of the families who participated in the educational opportunity program identified as Black American and more than half of all participating families were low-income. For Alana, there was a chance that by labeling her daughter, Nia, as an educational opportunity student, her daughter’s behavior and academic performance would be evaluated through a prism of race and class stereotypes that might activate unfavorable assumptions about her daughter’s intelligence, as well as her ability to integrate into the school’s culture.

In nearly every case, mothers brought their criticisms to teachers or administrators and insisted that schools address them. Overall, mothers’ concerns were two-fold. Mothers worried about how these race-related incidents would affect their daughters emotionally and academically. In addition, mothers worried about how these incidents affected non-black students. Namely, many mothers felt that when racial bigotry was allowed to flourish without reproach, it taught other students that such treatment towards Black Americans was acceptable and even justifiable. In this way, mothers’ school

involvement reflected their broader commitments to social justice and served as lessons in resistance for their daughters.

### **Institutional Responses to Mothers' Deployment of Cultural Capital**

Beyond issues of diversity and representation, when mothers felt their children were not receiving an educational experience that met their expectations many did not hesitate to intervene. Vanessa explained that she called the dean of her daughter's elite private school about a bullying incident and the school responded immediately.

*I finally just went to the head of the school and said, 'Look, this is not acceptable.' I said, 'This child is mean to other kids, she's bullying, she isolates them.' I said, 'This is not why we are here.' I said, 'So you all need to address this.'*

In this instance, Vanessa felt empowered to make certain demands due to her status in the community. Of note, Vanessa's family paid full tuition for the duration of her daughter's primary and secondary school education. However, Vanessa's concerns were addressed in part because administrators regarded her advocacy as the legitimate and appropriate response of a concerned parent. This was not the case for all mothers. Some mothers encountered hostility from school administrators when they voiced their concerns.

**Maternal concern or menacing mother?** Vera, an accomplished attorney, and married mother of one, wanted her daughter to be prepared to start school, so by the time Jamila entered kindergarten she could read and do math. Vera explained to me that before enrolling her daughter at a Montessori school she told the administration that her one concern was whether they could "keep her going." Vera acknowledged that private schools were probably used to parents making claims about their children's intellectual abilities, so she was not worried when the school did not seem especially impressed.

However, when Jamila entered kindergarten, the school discovered that she needed to be placed in an advanced classroom. Vera explained:

*So they had to put her in a different class because they were going to put her with the three-, four-, and five-year-olds, and I kept saying, but she can read. They moved her. So there were other kids [who could read] so they made a kindergarten-first grade class. And then in second grade they're like 'She's doing very well.' I went to the headmaster and said, 'Can you keep her going?' because the second-grade teacher came to me and said she needs more...and she said talk to the headmaster.*

Vera followed the teacher's advice and had a long talk with the headmaster about a curriculum plan for her daughter's third-grade year. But, the plan never came to fruition when the headmaster did not return to school the following year. When Vera inquired about whether the headmaster left any instructions for the new administration regarding her daughter's curriculum plan, she was simply told "No."

Vera recounted the conversation she ultimately had with administrators regarding this incident:

*I said, 'That's a problem for me because I kept her here. I gave you my money because we had a plan of what they were going to teach her. She was going to have a program. She had this writing program all planned out and all these things, but it went out the window. Either she [former headmaster] didn't write it down, you didn't look for it, you know, something's wrong here.'*

Vera then explained to me that she was disturbed by the response she received from the administrators at that meeting:

*They thought I was going to fight them or something. That's how ignorant they were, you know, angry black woman, we better get security or something. She actually said, 'I know you're upset, but I don't want...' I forget the words, but I was like, 'What do you think I'm going to do? What do you think I'm going to do?' And she's like, 'I don't know. I'm just...' I said, 'I'm just concerned about my child and I want to get the best education for her.'*

In describing this incident, it was clear that Vera felt she had been treated like a troublemaker. There was little empathy for her frustration and disappointment. Vera's concerns were de-legitimized by the administration. Instead, they feared for their personal safety. It appears that Vera's cultural capital and identity as a concerned mother ultimately was overshadowed by perceptions of African American women and mothers as "angry black women" who are "too honest" and "too direct."

This sentiment was echoed by Audrey, a former social services professional, and married mother of two, who felt that she had to exert a considerable amount of energy to defy racial stereotypes in her interactions with school administrators because over the years she had been "turned into a villain." Audrey explained that it all began in kindergarten. Although mostly a good experience, Audrey was alarmed when her oldest daughter's kindergarten teacher remarked that she was "the first black kid she ever had that got the highest score on [the] kindergarten exam." Audrey elaborated:

*She really thought she was saying, 'Wow, you have a smart daughter.' I think that's what she was really trying to say, but she didn't understand how that was the most frightening thing I've ever heard and how that set the stage for how I would parent my kids for the rest of the time that they would be in school because it showed me that your expectation of these kids of color is so low that you didn't know somebody was capable. I felt like I would have to watch every teacher from that point on with their low expectations.*

In fact, this was only the beginning of the difficulties Audrey encountered. Audrey spoke of prejudiced teachers, questionable instructional choices when schools broached the topic of African American culture, and a general indifference to her school-related concerns as a parent. When I asked if these dynamics changed over time from elementary school to high school, Audrey explained:

*I'd have to say across the board every time, every year I feel like as a black parent one, we have to show up and show that we're married, that they both [daughters] have the same father, that – it feels like we have to prove that we're a normal family and then prove that we have high expectations, that we're educated and that we expect the teachers to treat our kids a certain way just like everyone else or not clap for them on a mediocre job because they're doing better than the average black kid...making sure they're not – they're not giving them an A on something that's not an A, you know, just because they're doing better than the [black] kid from [the urban area].*

Audrey dispels the racial myth that African American parents expect teachers to pass their children along regardless of their mastery of the material. To the contrary, mothers told me that their actions were guided by their desire for “fair treatment.” Sonya, a business executive, and married mother of two, put it this way:

*I think black parents, at least the schools that my kids have been at, are extremely involved, because they've made choices to put them there. And I think when you do that, there's a lot of research and a lot of thought. You also get a lot of media about how black kids are treated differently. So there's this thought that when you go anywhere, that you're not getting the full Monty, you know.*

Unfortunately, mothers' attempts to ensure that their daughters were not treated unfairly and received the same educational opportunities as their white classmates were sometimes misconstrued. On one occasion, Audrey actually described to a white school administrator what she perceived as a lose-lose situation for African American parents: I said, ‘If we don't come in you guys talk about us and say we don't care about our children, and then [when] we show up we're frightening and scary.’ Like many other mothers in the study, Sonya and Audrey felt the need to have a constant presence at their daughter's schools. Parental involvement was not simply a buzzword. Mothers could not assume that their children would be treated with respect or given the same benefit of the doubt extended to white students and their families.



This was especially true for mothers with children who had learning disabilities. Mothers were cautious when teachers and administrators intimated that their children had special needs due to concerns about racial disparities in special education, but mothers were not in denial. As one mother quipped: “I wasn’t keeping my head in the sand about it.” Mothers consulted professionals and weighed the pros and cons of giving their children medication for attention-related issues. But, mothers also spoke up when they felt their children were not treated fairly. Maxine, a successful entrepreneur, and married mother of four, stated that it was a constant struggle to make sure her daughter had what she needed at her private school:

*She’s brilliant, but in a way that school would never take. So, a black girl who doesn’t test well, yeah, they were all over it to screen her. So it took a lot of work for them to see her brilliance and [for me] to have all these intimate conversations with her advisers.*

For Maxine, her educational care work included sitting alongside her daughter as she completed her homework so Maxine could explain to the teachers how her daughter processed the material and suggest alternative ways to respond to her when she struggled in class. As Maxine explained:

*They didn’t get that you have to give her the benefit of the doubt. [But] then seeing them make accommodations for other things that are easier to see. ...Is it because you don’t want to accommodate for the LD [learning disabilities]? Or, is it something about this girl you don’t like?*

In these moments, mothers were constantly decoding the behaviors of teachers and administrators. Of note, most respondents would not intervene without a thorough examination of the evidence lest they were accused of playing the proverbial “race card.” Indeed, mothers reported that it was not always clear how race, class, gender, and, in this case, (dis)ability simultaneously and independently contributed to unequal treatment by

school professionals. As a consequence, many mothers put forth great effort to make sense of the contradictory patterns of inequality that emerged within schools. In this way, mothers' educational care work included a significant amount of mental labor in order to prepare themselves and their adolescent daughters to confront discrimination whenever and wherever it appeared.

### **Mothers' Educational Care Work and the Cultivation of African American Girls' School-Based Resistance Strategies**

Mothers' school interventions were attempts to foster positive learning environments for their daughters, but mothers were not always able to intervene nor were their interventions always deemed legitimate. Daughters had to develop their own educational achievement strategies. To this end, mothers relied on the skills and knowledge they acquired from their own school and work experiences in order to guide their daughters. For some mothers, this approach represented a departure from how they were raised. Several mothers reported that they never told their parents about the harassment they experienced in school – they merely “processed it on my own.” Pamela explained:

*My parents just kind of felt like you're having privileges and advantages that most of us don't have, so suck it up. If someone makes fun of you, like, you know, suck it [up]...that's nothing compared to what they had...or just what people they knew who were still living in the city were dealing with, so they just felt like, you know, you'll be fine.*

Pamela's parents felt that regardless of any discrimination she may have encountered Pamela needed to be grateful for the sacrifices they made to move the family out of the city to a suburban neighborhood with good schools.

Other respondents kept their experiences from their mothers in particular because they did not want to burden them. “I don't remember telling her at all. I don't know if I

kept it from her because I didn't want her to worry. I don't know," Vera stated as she reflected on the racism she experienced as a young girl. Vera's family was one of the first African American families to integrate their suburban neighborhood. In fact, Vera's mother had decided to move to the suburbs to escape the racial violence that gripped the city in the wake of school desegregation. Vera therefore felt compelled to protect her mother from the racial discrimination she confronted in the neighborhood and at school. Laura, who attended a Catholic school where she was the only African American student, echoed this sentiment:

*My self-esteem was in very, very bad condition. But I never told my mom, because my mom was working so hard to keep us in private school because it was better than the public schools were – they were like night and day – and she wanted us to be college-educated; it wasn't gonna happen in the city schools, coming out of the public school system at that time. That's why I didn't want to tell her how bad the experience was.*

For the duration of her formal schooling years, Laura suffered in silence as she was socially ostracized by peers and ignored by teachers and administrators.

In response to the hostility many participants encountered, mothers developed survival strategies that represented everyday forms of resistance. Some mothers fought back with their academic achievements. These mothers said they accepted support from allies when they found them and then worked harder than everyone else. Yet attempts to dismiss and discredit their efforts often persisted. Beverly received admission to an Ivy League university but this accomplishment was largely ignored by her white suburban high school:

*The high school gave out thousands of dollars in scholarships to kids, now, here I am...I think there's only one other kid going to an Ivy League school...I graduated fourth in my class. I didn't get ten cents. Ask my mom. Not. Ten. Cents. [long pause]*

This was a formative experience for Beverly as it was for other mothers who had to contend with similar issues. For example, the school administration intervened to ensure that Phyllis would not be the valedictorian at the all-girls Catholic high school she attended. Interestingly, the fact that it was an act of racial discrimination, according to Phyllis, “didn’t click until later on in life.” Similarly, Maxine was selected as the salutatorian of her graduating class, but, initially, was forbidden to speak at graduation, which was a departure from tradition. It was only after a behind-the-scenes campaign by her parents and other adults in the community that Maxine was allowed to speak. This particular incident would stay with Maxine and later informed the advice she gave her daughters regarding the importance of “speaking up.”

In contrast, other respondents’ school experiences combined with personal challenges they faced at home and made it difficult for them to reach their academic potential. In fact, a few mothers in this latter group reported that a last-minute intervention by a teacher, coach, or community member was the only reason they graduated high school and even made it to college. Tellingly, once in college, most of the mothers who struggled academically and socially as children and adolescents excelled, and by the time we met for the interview all of them had obtained advanced degrees. In the end, despite the challenges mothers encountered, most were able to strategize and use their educations to their social and economic advantage. As the beneficiaries of the achievements of their mothers and fathers, respondents’ daughters were exposed to strategies that some mothers had not been privy to when they were children and adolescents.

**Helping daughters find their voice.** Study participants held different

perspectives on what constituted appropriate deportment in schools, but nearly all mothers in the present study opposed a school-based gender strategy that privileged silence. Instead, mothers encouraged their daughters to speak up and to “take up space in the world.” For several participants, speaking up was an act of resistance. It was a pronouncement of their daughters’ existence that followed in the tradition of African American women’s use of speech as part of their “collective denial of, and resistance to, their socially proclaimed powerlessness” (Fordham, 1993, p. 25). Speaking up in the classroom also was linked to academic success. This latter view was evident in the advice that Maxine and her husband gave their daughter who became withdrawn in the classroom once she entered high school:

*Every conversation we’ve been having with her [is] you cannot sit [silently] at private school where everything is about student-guided discussion, you have to speak and earn with your mouth. You can’t sit there quiet. You may have to come home and cry because it hurt, but if you didn’t mark off two checks on the paper that you spoke twice, they’re gonna think you’re stupid, and you’re not gonna get that excellent opportunity.*

In part, Maxine’s concern reflected the fact that active participation was one of the curriculum requirements at her daughter’s school. Additionally, Maxine did not view docility as a desirable trait not only because it represented the embodiment of a gender ideology that reproduces inequality, but also due to its association with pejorative images of African American women. Maxine explained:

*I would say my educational background put in the forefront of my mind [to] not be a mammy, which is the biggest stereotype that black women have to deal with. And a mammy in my book would be physically unattractive most of the time no matter what shape you’re in, dumb, in servitude, and limited in physical mobility - what you can do, and aspirationally, [what you dare to do]. And, so, from day one, every child has been taught not to accept this view of black women.*

In this way, to speak up was to undermine negative stereotypes about African American women's intelligence and place in the world. A part of learning to speak up also included teaching daughters to advocate for themselves. When Fallon's daughter, Nikki, expressed disappointment with a grade she received on an assignment, Fallon encouraged Nikki to bring those concerns directly to her teacher. Fallon recounted what happened after Nikki had spoken with her teacher:

*At the next parent-teacher night [the teacher] explained to me that Nikki asked [her] if she could talk to [her] at lunch one day about the grade that she had gotten in this particular area. After [she] looked at it again, [she] decided [Nikki] was right, you know, it wasn't a ten, but [she] did up it [increase the grade].*

To Fallon, this was an opportunity for Nikki to experience her own power. Fallon explained: "I think the biggest piece of our kids going to school with kids that don't look like them is that already they wonder if they [white peers] are better." Therefore, Fallon felt strongly that building her daughter's self-confidence would help Nikki to thrive in any setting.

In both cases (Maxine and Fallon), as well as in other stories recounted by mothers in the study, speaking up resulted in favorable outcomes for their daughters. However, mothers also were aware of the risks involved. Mothers' daughters could have been stereotyped as loud, aggressive, and disrespectful for their outspokenness. Indeed, it seemed that there was a fine line between insider and outsider status that required constant negotiation by mothers and their daughters. For example, when Audrey's daughter voiced concerns about "being on scholarship," Audrey offered this retort:

*I said, 'Look, you hold your head up. As far as I'm concerned this is reparations. We're not being extra thankful for nothing. We said thank you and that's it. You just walk around just like all those rich [white] kids whose parents are paying full tuition.'*

Certainly, Audrey's advice reflects a particular view of how the United States should make amends for its history of racial violence and oppression. But Audrey's quote suggests that despite the cultural capital of mothers and their families sometimes race and wealth operate in tandem as tools of social exclusion. Mothers' educational care work with their daughters, then, required frequent lessons in how to preserve their dignity notwithstanding the multivalent attempts to marginalize them.

### **Conclusion**

African American middle-class mothers devise and implement a myriad of strategies in order to protect and prepare their daughters for educational and occupational success. At the same time, African American middle-class mothers' educational care work reveals the dialectical nature of African American maternal power. Mothers in this study exhibited personal agency in their interactions with schools, but also operated within the ideological constraints of U.S. educational institutions. Despite their status as middle-class parents, when African American middle-class mothers behave in ways similar to other middle-class parents, their actions are too often interpreted through a lens of parental dysfunction, instead of maternal concern. Furthermore, the racial bias that African American middle-class mothers encounter within middle-class educational institutions increases the amount of effort and skill needed to effectively support their children's education. Although middle-class African American mothers approach their educational care work with great energy and joy, mothers also know that their class status will not insulate their daughters from racism and sexism. Therefore, alongside their educational care work, African American middle-class mothers seek to provide their daughters identity lessons on how to survive and thrive in the "real world."

## **Chapter 6: African American Middle-Class Mothers' Gendered Racial Socialization Practices**

In the previous chapter, I examined African American middle-class mothers' educational care work. I found that mothers went to great lengths to foster positive learning environments for their daughters beginning in elementary school. In addition, mothers – as part of their educational care work - actively challenged school-based gender strategies that promote silence and passivity. In this chapter, I expand my discussion of participants' mothering activities with an exploration of the messages and approaches mothers used to promote their daughters' sense of identity and consciousness as African American middle-class female adolescents. In so doing, I show that mothers endeavored to raise daughters who were self-assured and socially conscious.

### **Maternal Socialization and African American Female Identity Development**

Traditionally, adolescence has been conceptualized as a developmental stage when “girls become both capable of and thus ‘vulnerable to internalizing the impossible ideals and images’ of idealized or conventional femininity<sup>12</sup> (Debold as quoted in Sears, 2010, p. 5). In particular, early feminist gender research suggested that girls were growing up in a societal culture that celebrated feminine ideals of “passivity, silence, subordination, selflessness, and purity” (Sears, 2010, p. 5). However, these studies often failed to account for the effects of ethnic stereotyping and racism on the gender identity development of African American girls and other girls of color. Indeed, the need to counter racist and sexist assumptions that cast African American women as “undesirable,

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<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Sears (2010) states that “[f]emininities are social scripts that contain abstract ideals for what members of the category of woman are and should be. They are culturally and socially appropriate road maps for ‘what to do’ and ‘how to be’ a woman” (p. 99).



unlikable, and hypersexual” (Sears, 2010, p. 5) was a central theme in the socialization advice that participants transmitted to their daughters.

For example, in response to an interview question about what she wanted her two adolescent daughters to know about life as a black woman in America, Pamela (a divorced mother of two) offered this perspective:

*That they're a work in progress, number one. Never stop growing and being curious. I think humility is important but I also think knowing your worth and knowing that just because we're in a society that tells us [long pause]...don't believe it. Don't believe the hype. Don't believe what the message is, that we're not as pretty, that we're not as feminine, that we're not as worthwhile, that we're not as valuable. Which is why it's so important to be a critical thinker and have a challenging mind because we have to - I don't know how to say it - we have to kind of cultivate our own sense of ourselves and our own sense of beauty and value and worth because nobody around us in the environment that we inhabit is going to do it for us.*

In other words, Pamela's daughters needed to learn to engage in identity work. Identity work operates at the individual and group level (Sears, 2010). It is a personal and political endeavor. For African American mothers and their daughters, identity exploration is a two-fold process. On the one hand, mothers guide their daughters through the development of personal identities that reflect and reinforce their self-concept. On the other hand, daughters are taught that the process of self-definition and empowerment is not undertaken in isolation. That is, many African American mothers ascribe to the view that “the self is found within the context of family and community” (Collins, 2000, p. 113) not separate from it. In this way, “Black women and girls are not powerless - they are agents that recreate, resist, and reshape the social terrain” (Sears, 2010, p. 8) as they nurture self-identities that challenge dominant conceptions of African American womanhood.

In the following sections, I examine mothers' efforts to facilitate their daughters' identity exploration: one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence. As part of my inquiry, I explore what mothers did to promote their daughters' self-esteem and how mothers anticipated and responded to external attempts to undermine it. In the process, I foreground the strategies that mothers used to help daughters negotiate their social identities as African American middle-class female adolescents coming-of-age in predominantly white neighborhoods and schools. Respondents' accounts ultimately reveal how mothers' raced, classed, and gendered identities influenced their engagement with cultural definitions of African American women's empowerment, as well as the desire of some mothers to contest what they perceived as the strictures of middle-class black femininity.

**Maternal Identity Lessons: "... at its core it's all about self-esteem..."**

The process of cultivating and protecting their daughters' self-esteem was foundational to participants' identity lessons. As Elizabeth, a married mother of two, explained:

*I think a big challenge that we face as black women and as black girls is people underestimating us, underestimating our intellectual prowess, underestimating our credentials, underestimating our ideas, our voices - just underestimating us.*

Nearly all the mothers in this study reported that a primary goal of their maternal socialization practices was to instill a sense of "self worth," "self confidence," and "self love" in their daughters. As Fallon, a married mother of two, remarked: "I think one of the things that I'm just trying to do with her is just make sure that she is confident in who she is." Maureen, an adoptive mother of one, further elaborated on this theme:

*The thing I worry about the most with my daughter is that she have a strong sense of self and self esteem because in my experience educationally, professionally and in relationships, women who are real clear about who they are and have a real sense of 'Sink or swim – I'm okay as a person' fare better [in life].*

Mothers' personal experiences also supported the view that self-esteem could help their daughters confront any obstacles they might encounter. For instance, Fallon, now upper-middle-class, grew up in a family that struggled to make ends meet. As she put it, "I had nothing. We never got our hair done. We never had the best shoes." But, the one thing Fallon did have, was self esteem: "I've always been fairly confident, even though I didn't have a lot, I always had self esteem." Indeed, in Fallon's narration of her girlhood, a sense of confidence is what allowed her to imagine a different future for herself than the one she saw in her neighborhood. Fallon explained:

*I [didn't] know what was happening in other communities, but I knew in my immediate black, brown community in my neighborhood, I saw girls whose mothers lived around the corner and now they live down the street. And the father has a child with someone else. And I just thought, you know, I really don't want that.*

To Fallon, early motherhood represented a lack of ownership over one's body and reproduction, thus undermining girls' life chances. From Fallon's vantage point, self-esteem served as a protective mechanism in a social context where poverty, racism, and sexism converged to thwart young African American girls' access to the American Dream. As a result, Fallon hoped to cultivate that same sense of self-possession that she had as a teenager in her fourteen-year-old daughter:

*For me, looking back on my experience and realizing how just having that little bit of self-esteem, that was foundational to me, [it] is what got me through. And so for her that's my goal. First, you have to feel confident in who you are and that will help allow you to transition to wherever you are and whatever it is you're doing.*

For many mothers in this study, self-esteem was seen as an important psychological and emotional resource that helps African American women thrive within a social order that devalues African American women. In this way, cultivating a positive self-image in their daughters was one way that African American mothers could push back against “oppressive structures and degrading discourses” (Sears, 2010, p. 103). As a consequence, study participants developed a range of strategies early on to nurture their daughters’ sense of pride. For example, Pamela, a divorced mother of two, purchased books for her daughters “themed around loving the skin that you’re in.” As children, Pamela also made sure her daughters played with black baby dolls with different skin complexions, hair textures, and hairstyles. In fact, the decision to purchase culturally relevant books and toys for their children was a common theme across mothers’ interviews.

However, as daughters entered adolescence, mothers became increasingly alarmed by popular depictions of African American womanhood. Several mothers identified a few contemporary media images they felt were positive and affirming. These included BET’s Black Girls Rock! Award show (2006-present), *Black-ish* on ABC (2015-present), and *Dark Girls* on Netflix (2011). Yet, these images were perceived as exceptions to the rule.

Nearly all mothers reported that they believed the vast majority of media representations of African American women were degrading and perpetuated false narratives about “who we are.” April, a married mother of two, endorsed this view:

*I don't feel like they show the whole complete, well-roundedness of black people. They show one side of it. They show us not being able to have good relationships, where we're always having disagreements and confronting [fighting] each other. ...I just never see us depicted in a good*

*light. It's never like the professional black women that's doing things, that are married, that have kids that are doing things that are positive. ...I just think they just want to see us [that way], so when white folks see us they see us as not being able to do anything...like they just look at us like we're a mess.*

Not only was April frustrated that so many images failed to depict the lives of the women she knew – African American professional married women – but April's narrative also suggests that the invisibility of such images is intentional. Especially disconcerting to April was that vacuous portrayals of African American women as “unwed mothers” and “welfare queens” seemed to have achieved iconic status in the public imagination and were now treated as representations of black authenticity. In April's estimation, this meant that there were few images that aligned with and mirrored the social realities of African American middle-class girls and their families.

Interestingly, even when media images did include representations of professional women, African American women still were cast as undesirable. Pamela, a divorced mother of two, noted:

*We are portrayed as so monolithic and there are so many images of black women that are so destructive to how complicated we really are and that frustrates me immensely. You are either a mean, fat bitch or you're a whore or you're on welfare and you've had twelve babies. That's pretty much it. And, if you are educated, then you're a bitch automatically. To walk around the world and have people look at you and think they know you is really frustrating. Because they have this ready-made box that they're going to stick you in and they don't know you at all. That's something that I wish I could spare my daughters.*

Yet mothers knew their daughters would not be spared. These images and the messages they communicated about African American women simply reinforced mothers' efforts to surround their daughters with positive role models.

Some mothers sent their daughters to conferences that focused on identity issues. April's daughter, for example, attended an annual conference for African American girls organized by alumnae of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Mothers also identified their friends as role models for their daughters. Phyllis, a never married mother of two, explained:

*It's really tough. And trying to make sure that your child feels worthy and that they're attractive, that they're good, you constantly put positives. Because if they're hit constantly with negatives, then that leads to all sorts of other things. So the girls [daughters] have pretty positive women around them. All of my closest friends are educated professionals, so they're around women who speak well, carry themselves well, and work. So I think being around that you see it. I think subliminally that affects them when you have positive images that you see constantly around you.*

This sentiment was echoed by Jackie who felt that real-life African American women helped her daughter filter out the negative images of African American women and girls that circulated in the media and further normalized achievement as an integral part of African American women's identity. Jackie remarked:

*She doesn't relate [to the media images]...and I don't know if it's because of where we live, or if there's not enough images to relate to. She sees my friends. All my friends have degrees, most or a lot of them have PhDs, so she sees accomplished black women around her, and I think that might be part of the reason because it's normal for her. It's become a norm, yeah, we go to college.*

Jackie's account illuminates two issues that informed several mothers' identity lessons. The first is that media images of African American female intellectuals were sparse. At the time I spoke with Jackie, it still was the case that the African American public intellectuals with the most visibility and notoriety were male. Second, representations of African American women rarely emphasized their intellectual prowess and professional accomplishments, especially in fields such as medicine, law, and technology. Thus,

mothers often turned to their friends and colleagues to reinforce their socialization messages about the importance of “believing in yourself” and not letting “people limit your dreams.” Quite simply, these women offered multi-dimensional portraits of African American womanhood. In this way, their lives were to serve as inspiration and evidence of African American women’s power to self-define and chart their own destiny.

### **Black is Beautiful: Mothers’ Strategies for Promoting Self-Defined Notions of Attractiveness**

The adolescent years are associated with numerous physical changes that often influence how young people evaluate their appearance in comparison to their peers. It is therefore unsurprising that with the onset of puberty and entry into adolescence mothers’ identity lessons began to explore the pressures their daughters might feel to conform to normative standards of beauty. For quite some time there has been widespread concern and outrage that American teenage girls are constantly bombarded with societal messages that imply that a woman’s physical appearance is more important than any other characteristic she may possess. Despite recent efforts to combat sexist double standards and encourage young women to appreciate their “inner beauty,” adolescent girls are still judged based on their perceived attractiveness. In addition, adolescent girls have to contend with a pervasive beauty ideology that equates attractiveness with goodness.

Like many of today’s American parents, mothers in the present study were concerned that their daughters’ appearance would become the primary barometer from which they evaluated their self-worth. However, mothers also recognized that mainstream definitions of physical beauty often exclude African American women. This meant that mothers’ socialization messages about physical attractiveness had to serve a dual function. Mothers sought to cultivate their daughters’ sense of beauty *and* reinforce the

message that physical beauty should not be privileged over other personal qualities.

Although nearly all study participants reported that they had constant conversations with their daughters about the importance of being critical consumers of mainstream discourses on physical attractiveness, this particular concern was heightened among mothers living in predominantly white communities. Karen, a married mother of two, remarked:

*I don't want her comparing herself to white girls. I didn't go through that because my girlfriends were black [growing up], so I was comparing myself to pretty black girls. I didn't care about the white girls.*

Within the United States, the dominant standard of beauty is based on phenotypic features most closely associated with women of European descent. Yet what Karen's quote illuminates is that the ideals of feminine beauty that celebrate the physical appearance of European American women do not only exist "out there" in the media. White teenage girls were mothers' daughters' classmates, teammates, and best friends; that is, they comprised a significant portion of mothers' daughters' immediate peer group. On the one hand, some mothers speculated that such proximity might enhance their daughters' ability to critique cultural narratives of white adolescent femininity. In this way, mothers hoped their daughters would recognize that the images on TV and in teen magazines not only erased or distorted girls of color, but also were inaccurate representations of white girls. On the other hand, mothers felt that daughters were not immune from wanting to fit in and "be like their white girlfriends" who mothers believed were more likely to be invested in white cultural ideals of beauty.

Several mothers also expressed concerns about the potential influence of teenage boys' attitudes, especially their internalization of societal beauty norms, on daughters'



evaluations of their personal beauty and desirability. Victoria, a married mother of three, described what she saw as the possible connection between the attitudes of male peers and her thirteen-year-old daughter's self-assessments:

*Like I know that [her] dad and I have really validated her individuality... who she came into the world as and all of her attributes. I fear that as she gets older there's a counter narrative that she's going to come up against. I don't know what that's going to mean for her. I'm aware that as a young woman of color, she's already looking around and feeling like, 'Guys don't look at me, boys don't like me.' And I say, 'Well, you're beautiful, like what [do you mean] they don't like you?' - 'No one looks at me, no one talks to me [like they do] everybody else, like the girls who have long hair, or girls who are really skinny.' ...So there is this standard she's measuring herself up against. And so I'm seeing a young lady who at one point was very confident starting to wax and wane as she enters the next phase of identity formation.*

Of note, a few mothers reported that their daughters' white and Asian male peers had made degrading comments to "her face". This included statements such as "you're pretty for a black girl" or "you're our friend [but] we don't *like* black girls." Mothers admitted that although they were shocked by the callousness of these statements they did not expect white or Asian males to pursue their daughters romantically. In contrast, several mothers were particularly disheartened when daughters reported that their African American male peers appeared to prefer white girls.

Cynthia (married mother of two): *"...the two boys of color that are [at the same school], they like the white girls. They don't like her. And she's like, 'What's wrong with me?' I mean she asked – this was sixth grade, when she was like, 'All of the boys like this girl...and she's really skinny and she's blonde.' And I was like... 'but you're never going to be white and you're never going to be blonde. So you have to love who you are. You're a beautiful girl. Stop trying to compare yourself to what she is.' ...It's hard to have conversations where you have to say, 'You are good and you are beautiful and you are smart and you are worthy, why these boys don't like you now, that's their problem, don't worry about that.'*

Cynthia's quote illustrates how some mothers attempted to console their daughters. But it also demonstrates that, for most mothers in the study, facilitating the development of self-defined notions of attractiveness and instilling a sense of pride in daughters required a nuanced approach. In part, this is because it can be challenging for adolescent girls to create their own sense of beauty when they may experience rejection of their self-definitions among their peer group. As such, mothers kept an eye out for any indications that their daughters might be struggling with their self-image.

For instance, Karen, a married mother of two, only began to worry about her twelve-year-old daughter when, recently, she made an off-hand comment about her eye color. Karen stated:

*Tiffani said, 'There's nothing special about my eyes. They're just brown'...so that starts to bother me, you're thinking your eyes need to be green or blue to be beautiful? So that is something that we're going to have to actively work on. It's the image. And I didn't really - until yesterday - it didn't really hit me that she might have an image problem.*

To Karen, her daughter's comment was a cue that she needed to have more discussions with her daughter about mainstream ideas of physical attractiveness. Indeed, mothers' accounts indicated that their interpretations, concerns, and socialization messages varied in relation to different facets of beauty. Nonetheless what was consistent across mothers' interviews is that the process of self-definition is a cross-generational effort that occurs between African American women and girls.

**“Our body is different than their body.”** Only a few mothers reported that their daughters expressed concerns with their body size and shape. Shirley shared the following anecdote: “I remember my oldest daughter coming home and telling me that her thighs were too big.” In response, Shirley attempted to assuage her seventeen-year-

old daughter's concerns by telling her: "I'm like, 'Honey, you are fine. That's not how you're built. Your body is different.'" Cynthia, a married mother of two, used a similar message with her fourteen-year-old daughter:

*I told her our body is different than their body. And it's hard to tell her your friend does not look like you. If you guys stand side-by-side, like, if you have on a crop top and leggings, your figure is different than that. And it's not anything you did wrong, you have a beautiful figure and it's great, and when you're an adult it's going to be fabulous. But, right now, it's not appropriate for you to be wearing that kind of thing. And she's like, 'Well, I'm just not going to eat so then I'll just be skinny.' I'm like, 'That's not the answer. You can't do that. You have to take care of your body and exercise.' So we have to have those conversations about, you know, it's okay that you're not, you know, anorexic and paper thin.*

Here, in both cases, Shirley and Cynthia appear at times to invoke notions of racial body types in order to promote self-acceptance. The implicit message is: African American women are born with particular body types.

In contrast, some mothers discussed their attempts to preempt the development of body image issues by encouraging their daughters to appreciate the diversity of all women's bodies. Alana described her approach to teaching body positivity to her two daughters this way:

*I think I was big on sort of self-awareness. Like we don't own a scale at home. Words like fat and skinny are not allowed [because] they're offensive words. And as much as society says skinny is not offensive – not everyone wants to be skinny.*

To Alana, labels such as "fat" and "skinny" were used to categorize people and assign value to particular body sizes. Instead, Alana wanted her daughters to see beauty in a range of body sizes and shapes and to push back against an approach to body acceptance grounded in notions of racial typing.

On average, African American girls tend to have more expansive views of what constitutes attractiveness (Duke, 2000). This may explain the relatively few mothers who reported that body size was a major topic of discussion with their daughters. Past studies have shown that African American girls and women usually have better body image than other racial/ethnic groups (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). In fact, a few mothers reported that their daughters openly celebrated their more curvaceous figures. Vera shared:

*What's interesting is that even though she's a jeans and t-shirt girl, she's not wearing a large t-shirt. She likes to show her shape, which is really kind of humorous to me, and okay because I want her to be proud of her body.*

Still, there is evidence to suggest that the pressure some women feel to meet the standards of a curvaceous ideal may underlie recent increases in body dissatisfaction that have been observed among African American college-age women (Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010). In other words, while African American women may be less likely to evaluate their physical appearance in relation to a thin ideal this does not insulate them from negative self-assessments based on the body types that are most often celebrated within African American communities. At the same time, Cynthia and Shirley's experiences appear to confirm some of the fears mothers had that their daughters would assess their physical appearance by comparing themselves to their white female counterparts. Perhaps there was no topic where mothers' concerns about internalized racism were more visible than in their discussions about African American women's hair.

**Hair lessons: Identity, power, and self-love.** When I asked mothers about decisions they made related to their daughters' hair and how those decisions may have changed over time, most jokingly asked: "How long do you have [to talk]?" Hair was

integral to mothers' understandings of identity, empowerment, and self-esteem.

Additionally, conversations about hair revealed some mothers' emotional pain - a feeling that they hoped their daughters would never experience in relation to their own hair. In particular, mothers' decisions about how to care for their daughters' hair, how to style their daughters' hair, and whether to apply perms to (or straighten) their daughters' hair were prominent themes in participants' narratives and carried specific meanings about African American womanhood.

At the outset, mothers varied in their attitudes about whether to perm their daughters' hair. Shirley, for example, stated:

*I don't want them thinking that straight hair is better than the hair they have, but, at the same time, it's a hairstyle and if it's easier to manage and they're happier about the way they look or they like it and it's more manageable then it's not the political battle that I have to pick with my kids.*

Gail, a married mother of two, offered a similar view:

*My daughter wants her hair to be long cascading down her back, but Baby, that's not gonna happen. We ain't got that kind of hair. So even though I tried to keep my girls as natural as long as possible when my oldest asked for a relaxer in middle school I let her get it 'cause I got one and that's her choice.*

In this way, Shirley and Gail narrated their decision as an example of creating opportunities for their daughters to make their own choices about their hair. However, several mothers acknowledged that the decision to straighten or lighten one's hair always could be interpreted as an attempt to emulate white cultural models of beauty:

*April (married mother of two): She wanted her hair straight because of course the neighbors are white and they wear their hair straight, so she wanted it. But I told her I was like, 'We're black. This is our hair. We're going to do it like it works for us.'*

From April's vantage point, her fourteen-year-old daughter's interest in straight hair was the result of growing up in a white neighborhood and wanting to be accepted by her white female peers. Similarly, Maureen reported that "all of a sudden" in seventh grade her daughter decided that she did not want to wear braids anymore. According to Maureen, her daughter had never been "conscious about it" until then. Maureen seemed conflicted in her opinion on the matter:

*I haven't had strong feelings about it [straightening her hair]. I was really more into the health of her hair. But it kind of bothered me that she didn't want to wear the braids and I knew it was because of the girls and what they would say - the white girls. I knew what they'd say because they'd touch it and they would want to know how she does it and they want to know how long it is and she didn't want that attention.*

In Maureen's account it is unclear whether her daughter no longer liked her braids or if the desire to have straight hair was influenced by the attention she received at school. Maureen later expressed that she was sympathetic to her daughter's choice to wear a straight style since natural hairstyles made differences in the physical characteristics of White American and African American girls more visible. But Maureen also reported mixed feelings about her daughter's desire to change her appearance in order to decrease visibility among her peers as it ran counter to maternal lessons about pride and identity.

Several mothers also expressed concerns about what it meant for daughters to want hair textures that afforded more movement. Vera recounted that her daughter's first relaxer in eighth grade "gave her a lot of confidence because now it moved." In fact, some mothers reported that having straight hair even influenced their daughter's mannerisms. For example, Patricia, a married mother of two, noted:

*My daughter had an issue because all her little girlfriends [had] the long straight blond hair and her hair wasn't long and straight like that. I remember I would - I had her hair braided one time and had some*

*extensions put in and she just loved it. It was long. She was throwing her hair around. It was like, 'Oh my God.' But to this day she likes her hair just straight. She gets her hair done, just wants it straight, no curls. She just wants it straight.*

Of note, Sonya, a married mother of two, questioned the tendency to interpret African American girls' enjoyment of "flinging" their hair around as problematic. Sonya explained:

*My daughter has beautiful hair, and I can remember a couple of times some [black] moms, especially one mom saying, 'I was watching your daughter the other day, and she was just flinging that hair around'...And I'm like, 'Well, you know what, if she's got flingable hair, what's wrong with her flinging it?' That's the way I look at it. Why do we think that is bad?*

Based on Sonya's account, the act of "hair flinging" appears to symbolize to some mothers an embrace of white beauty ideals and the valuation of straight hairstyles over natural hairstyles (i.e., braids, twists, afros). But, as Sonya reminded me, African Americans have diverse hair textures. Thus, Sonya took umbrage at the suggestion that "natural" is always synonymous with "kinky" and that African American girls should never wear "straight styles". To Sonya, "straight styles" were not a representation of whiteness. They existed on the continuum of hair textures that occurred "naturally" among African American women.

While Sonya recoiled at the suggestion that there was something wrong with her daughter "flinging her hair around", the hair-related concerns of other mothers in the study exposed anxieties they had about what those choices suggested about the effectiveness of their identity lessons. This sentiment is captured in Selena's narrative about her sixteen-year-old daughter's decision to wear her hair curly and unrestrained:

*She wears her hair out almost everyday. That I should take as a compliment to my parenting. I'm hard on myself. I think there are a million things I think I could do better as a parent, but the fact that she doesn't lock her hair back everyday like I still do or did is great. She's like even if people make fun of her hair or they try to touch it or whatever she's out there with it. And, it doesn't look like the other girls' hair, most of the other girls at her school. She carries herself with pride.*

Like Selena, many mothers viewed their daughter's decision to wear natural styles as part of a broader reclamation and embrace of their racial and gender identity. Conversely, when daughters wanted to transition from natural styles to straight styles, mothers reported a range of emotions. Victoria shared:

*I was in a dilemma. It was very hard for me. I was very sad. I was very, very sad. What I said to her was, 'You are an amazingly beautiful person with an amazingly beautiful head of hair, and I want you to appreciate that your hair has its own personality, its own sort of life and vibrancy, and I just want you to know that there's nothing wrong with what your hair can do and does, that that's you, that's beautiful'...So part of what I've learned about the narrative around her hair is giving her a real sense of pride and appreciation. Not something that I got, because I warred with mine. We were at war with each other. I had a very antagonistic relationship with it. And I always wanted her to embrace hers. So I'm trying to teach her a narrative of self-love and embracing, as well as a language about advocacy and self-protection.*

Strikingly, despite the distress some participants reported with regard to their daughter's hair attitudes and decisions, mothers also identified moments they felt provided evidence that their daughters had received their messages about identity and empowerment. For instance, Victoria's fourteen-year-old daughter came to her with the following issue:

*She said, 'I just don't like people coming up and touching.' She said, 'I'm not a pet.' So I said, 'You need to say that that's your body.' Your hair is a part of your body. You wouldn't let anyone come and touch some other part of you in that way, and if that's how you feel about your hair, then you need to say, 'Do not do that. I am not a pet.'*



In this way, a conversation that began because Victoria's daughter wanted to experiment with a straight hairstyle served as a catalyst for a lesson on bodily autonomy and consent. Mothers' accounts indicated that hair was a complex issue that created tensions between mothers and daughters. Indeed, for many mothers, hair was a metaphor for and embodiment of the contradictory nature of African American womanhood as a site of power, resistance, and, at times, disappointment.

### **Maternal Lessons in the Politics of African American Womanhood**

Part of learning what it means to be an African American woman in America is to understand the social status of African American women within and outside of African American communities. To that end, through their identity lessons, mothers attempted to transmit critical social knowledge to their adolescent daughters in order to prepare them to become participants in the collective struggle for racial justice. For decades, African American women have worked collaboratively and tirelessly to address the needs of their families and communities. In addition to cultivating daughters' personal identities and sense of empowerment, mothers' identity lessons addressed the importance of African American women's solidarity. At the same time, while the themes and issues that constitute the politics of African American women's empowerment have endured across generations, African American women do not have uniform perspectives and opinions on how best to effectuate social change. Individual African American women interpret and respond to the social issues that impact Black Americans in different ways. It is also the case that based on their social status, historically, middle-class and professional African American women have been held to a specific set of expectations regarding their comportment and role as leaders and representatives of the community (Barnes, 2016).

Thus, as discussed in previous chapters, mothers' social class identities influenced how they negotiated cultural conceptions of African American womanhood.

**Building community across social class boundaries.** As several participants noted in their interviews, the desire to build solidarity with African American women outside their immediate social environments meant that many mothers had to negotiate the class divides and tensions that exist within African American communities. Maxine, a married mother of four, noted:

*I don't think we've solved the Black Bourgeoisie problem. ...We have not solved the problem of privilege and black people because they have an obligation always to do more. And my kids know that they're not becoming the professional whatever for themselves. They have to do more. And we put them at a disadvantage in a way because they don't have company. Because we've removed them [from the community] they learn what I grew up with through conscious effort. We have not solved how do you lead from a position of privilege and care and know that person back home who speaks broken English and is not going to graduate from high school because their father is a drunk and their mother couldn't hold that third job. We haven't solved that problem.*

Embedded in Maxine's analysis is the reality that in some parts of the United States middle-class and upper-middle-class Black Americans are geographically disconnected from lower-income Black Americans. This separation reflects broader patterns of class segmentation and inequality found throughout the country. But, at times, the separation between different segments of the population is intentional.

For example, some mothers felt like they had to erect boundaries between them and their extended families. Audrey, a married mother of two, echoed this view when she described how she responded to a family member's recent request for assistance:

*I had someone call asking if they can move in and I just have to tell them no. I'm just like, no. I had a niece that's been out of control. She's 21 now. She says she's ready to turn her life around but I said I have two daughters here. It's like you smoke, you have all kinds of stuff going on. I*

*said, 'I can't bring that into their lives.' ...She made some choices and she owned all that stuff on the phone, but I said, 'I can't bring it into my home if you change your mind.' ...But I said, 'I will help you.' She hasn't called back though. She's probably angry, but I had to say no. It's like I have kids.*

Audrey was not alone in her concern that certain familial connections might expose mothers' daughters to the social problems that African Americans and other marginalized groups face in economically distressed communities. However, mothers also saw themselves as playing a vital role in fostering social connections among African American women from diverse class backgrounds. Significantly, based on their community involvement, mothers sought opportunities for their daughters to build these connections as well.

Vera, a married mother of one, offered the following anecdote:

*So Jocelyn has to see the city and know what it is. She's actually in a [job] program right now. And, funny thing, my husband who grew up in the city was worried about her getting along with city black kids. And I was like, 'I don't believe we're having this conversation.' He's like, 'They might fight and argue. They won't be her friend.' I'm like, 'First, she's black. They're all black, so she's amongst her peers. They have personalities. Stop labeling them! [Y]ou're thinking that she's not going to get along with them just because she goes to a private school? What are you doing? You're setting her apart. Don't make her feel like she's different than them.'*

Although Vera was critical of her husband for prejudging the “city black kids” at her daughter's youth employment site, Vera acknowledged that many African American middle-class families found themselves straddling multiple social worlds. Vera elaborated on this theme:

*I think it's hard, but you have to give back, so I try to put myself in positions to do something, and have conversations with people. I don't think I'm doing enough. We're surviving. Everybody's surviving. We're just kind of surviving on our own levels. I moved to this neighborhood because I knew there were a lot of black people here. Their schools suck,*

*but I could have black people live next door to me. And let my kids see black people who have a house, you know, like ours that live next door. That was a conscious choice that I made, so that I could be a part of a community and she can play with them – soccer and all those things, with that community, even though she goes to [school] someplace else. She's gotta see black people on a regular basis, and see that we take care of each other.*

For Vera, the decision to live in a racially mixed community with a sizable black population was guided by the fact that most of her daily life was spent in predominantly white settings. Moreover, through this conscious act, Vera sought to demonstrate her commitment to the broader community.

In this way, Vera was similar to many middle-class African American parents who believe that developing a strong racial identity and consciousness requires meaningful and frequent interactions with other African Americans (Lacy, 2007). In fact, several mothers in the present study were worried that their social distance from African American families of lesser means would lead their children to develop troubling positions on public policy issues and uninformed evaluations of the lived experiences of poor and working-class African Americans. Fallon, a married mother of two, explained:

*The thing that perhaps doesn't come up in these conversations is that we try in our effort to help our kids attain and progress beyond what our parents did [that] sometimes it's at the expense of...they don't realize all these other pieces are out there. Because they've been sheltered and protected from, you know, either unwanted pregnancies or suspensions – some of the negative quote-unquote stereotypes. They've been sheltered from that, and, as a result, eventually leads them to think that, 'Well, why can't people just pull themselves up by their bootstraps?' And it's not that simple. You don't overcome generations of racism and poverty, just by pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Your counterparts have had hundreds of years [of a] head start. Because our kids are in sort of the mainstream they don't realize these other pieces are happening until they see it.*

In response to the concerns articulated here by Fallon, many mothers expected their daughters to be appreciative, to acknowledge their social advantages, and to seek opportunities to give back to the community. Other mothers, especially those from poor and working-class backgrounds, took their children to visit their hometowns so that they could gain a better understanding of how social inequality operates in America. In doing so, mothers challenged the notion of a “post-racial” society. Mothers’ socialization lessons both acknowledged the social progress that African Americans have made in the post civil rights era and emphasized that more work needs to be done to improve the life chances of the most vulnerable members of society. By teaching daughters that they were part of a broader collective and thus their fates were tied to the fates of others, mothers sought to nurture daughters’ sense of consciousness.

**Challenging models of middle-class African American womanhood.** Although most mothers impressed upon their daughters the importance of African American women’s solidarity, mothers differed in their adherence to cultural expectations associated with African American middle-class women’s role in the quest for racial equality. Historically, African American middle-class women were “charged with making sure the presentation of black womanhood, motherhood, and career were representative of strong moral character and proper decorum” (Barnes, 2016, p. 147). In this way, African American women’s bodies and behaviors have been used as class markers within African American communities and to demonstrate black people’s decency to White Americans. For instance, Tamara, a married mother of three, stated that she was constantly on her daughter’s case about how she presented herself to the world:

*I’m always telling her constantly respect yourself. Carry yourself like a lady. Always be professional. Because you could be doing something and*

*the other people, your friends, could be doing something but you're going to be the one in most cases that's going to be singled out because you're different. You're going to have to be much better than your [white] counterparts because they will already have their mind made up about you. Unless you shine in a lot of cases you may go unnoticed.*

To Tamara, her daughter's appearance and comportment were not only identity issues, but also represented stigma management strategies in the face of racism and sexism.

Recognizing the weight of such expectations, Shirley, a divorced mother of four, remarked: "I guess sometimes I'm hesitant to allow them [daughters] to buy into that you need to present a certain image and that you're representing all of us." For Shirley, facilitating her daughter's development of her "own sense of self" meant questioning the pressure and constraints placed on middle-class African American women and girls to constantly dispel racial myths about African Americans. To Shirley, it did not seem fair to continue to ask women, and in this case young women, to do "all the work" in challenging racial stereotypes. Furthermore, Melanie, a married mother of one, suggested that conformity at times stymied African American women's ability to be their "authentic selves":

*I see a lot more rigidity amongst us, amongst women of color who are professionals, a lot more formality than I see with some of the [white] women that I'm exposed to in terms of my neighborhood, in terms of not letting your guard down, not letting your hair down, not kind of being who you are and I think as a race, oftentimes, we have to do that or we feel like we have to do that because of how society is going to perceive us. ...I also think I see a lot more conformity in terms of how you define what a black professional woman is and how she has to be and, again, I think that's probably society-driven that...you have to kind of be more in the box than say our counterparts that are white...like when we're in a black [middle class] environment...there's the view you need to be in these kind of boxes to be affluent, to be professional, to be whatever. And, so, we don't give ourselves much space allowing us to be whatever we are.*

Interestingly, Melanie's perspective was based on her observations of other middle- and upper-middle-class African American adult women. In fact, the ability to self-define proved to be an evolving process even for some of the participants in this study.

For many mothers, their social activism provided an opportunity for them to help create a world in which their daughters might be able to express themselves more freely. Quite simply, mothers hoped to make an easier path for subsequent generations of African American girls and women. Maxine, a married mother of four, put it this way:

*We cannot keep an America having the challenges that are tied to the way that we came to this country. ...I want some more joy because that's what the American Dream is about. We deserve that carefree, that thing that people come from all over the world for - it is that carefree I can do whatever the hell I want Texan kind of thing, and we all deserve it. It might take a while to do it. [But] we're gonna get it.*

In the end, mothers' identity lessons were meant to give daughters the tools they needed to create happy, productive, and fulfilling lives for themselves.

## **Conclusion**

African American middle-class mothers, through their gendered racial socialization messages and practices, seek to address the question: What does it mean to be an African American woman? Implicit in this question is the recognition that race and gender are defining forces in African American women's everyday lives. To this end, African American middle-class mothers attempt to provide gendered racial identity lessons that will equip their daughters with the psychological and social tools necessary to persevere in the face of adversity. Nonetheless African American middle-class mothers' socialization strategies suggest that there are class-specific meanings attached to conceptions of African American womanhood. That is, despite African American

women's shared social conditions vis-à-vis race and gender, class affects how these conditions are experienced.

In addition, although African American middle-class mothers view solidarity as an important route to individual and collective empowerment, class may create a structural and ideological divide between middle-class African American women and African American women of lesser means. This has potential consequences not only for African American women's identity development, but also African American women's political influence more generally. Moreover, African American middle-class mothers often find that they are evaluated based on cultural definitions of middle-class African American womanhood that, at times, stifle self-expression. Thus, while African American middle-class mothers strive to cultivate their daughter's ability to "define who [they] are on [their] own terms" (Sears, 2010, p. 100), these gendered racial identity lessons also reveal mothers' longings for the full recognition of African American women's humanity in all of its complexity.



## **Chapter 7: African American Middle-Class Mothers' Perspectives on Sex, Dating, and Relationships**

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I explored participants' mothering activities in terms of their efforts to cultivate and protect the self-esteem of their adolescent daughters. To this end, the emphasis was on the strategies mothers enacted to help their daughters develop self-identities and personal politics that reflected their lived experience as African American middle-class girls and young women. In this chapter, through an exploration of mothers' sexual socialization practices, I describe how race, class, and gender shaped mothers' approaches to preparing their daughters for life after high school and college.

### **Maternal Protective Care Work<sup>13</sup>: Race, Sexuality, and Girl/Womanhood**

Parents of adolescents must prepare their teenage children for entry into adult society. Not surprisingly, the topic of sexuality emerged in mothers' narrative accounts about their adolescent daughters' social development and transition into womanhood. In general, parents in the United States report ambivalence about the emerging sexuality of their teenage children. Sinikka Elliott (2010) notes that parents tend to sidestep conversations about the "mechanics of sex" and instead "center their lessons on sexual morality" (p. 191). Moreover, parents often perceive their teenage children as sexually innocent but view other parents' teenage children as sexually motivated. For many parents, then, one goal of their protective care work is to shield their teenage children, especially their daughters, from the sexual appetites of their peers.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Sinikka Elliott and Elyshia Aseltine (2012), protective carework refers to the ways in which parents "gaug[e] potential threats to children's well-being, determin[e] how much autonomy to allow them, and employ[] strategies to monitor children's activities, peers, and surroundings" (p. 720).

However, constructions of teen sexuality and childhood innocence are also shaped by the larger social context. Specifically, “the lens of child innocence is used mostly to construct white, middle-class children. Children without this race and class privilege are construed as hypersexual, ‘unsalvageable,’ and a corrupting influence” (Elliott, 2010, p. 195). As a result, teenage children of color must perform significantly more ‘cultural work’ (Barnes, 2016) to be perceived as innocent and vulnerable, and by extension, redeemable and worthy of compassion if or when they make a mistake. Because hegemonic views of race, gender, and sexuality are used to reproduce social inequities, racial-ethnic minority parents’ perspectives on teen sexuality frequently reflect their anxieties about their children’s futures in a racially stratified society.

In the following sections, I explore in greater detail the assumptions and inequalities that shape African American middle-class mothers’ understandings of teen sexuality. I also examine mothers’ attitudes about their daughters’ emerging sexuality, as well as the socialization strategies they rely on to assuage their fears about the future. Mothers’ sexuality-related communications ultimately revealed broader questions about the intersectional effects of race, class, and gender on their daughters’ life course trajectories.

### **Maternal Sexuality Lessons**

In order to understand mothers’ sexuality lessons it is important to consider the context in which their sexual communications occurred. Most study participants reported that their adolescent daughters received some type of in-school sex education, though schools varied in terms of when and how they introduced the topic of sexual development. In addition, the majority of mothers in the study supported comprehensive,

medically accurate school-based sexuality education and viewed it as part of an ongoing conversation that parents should have with their children. As April, a married mother of two, stated: “I think the schools can start the conversation, but I do think parents [should] talk to them too.” Like April, most mothers augmented the school curricula and transmitted their own values and expectations related to their daughter’s emerging sexuality.

At the time of the initial research interviews, only one participant was able to confirm that one of her daughters (albeit not the study target daughter) had vaginal sex as a high school student. In fact, most mothers characterized their high-school-age daughters as young compared to their peers. Specifically, mothers’ perceptions were based on their daughters’ current interests. Young daughters were academically oriented, “oblivious to boys,” and still enjoyed playing children’s games in sex-segregated groups. In turn, mothers’ sexuality lessons mainly consisted of guidance on how daughters should conduct themselves sexually as adult women. In so doing, mothers’ lessons reflected their efforts to account for the unique impact of race and gender inequality on African American women’s sexual experiences.

**Mothers’ perceptions of teen girls’ sexuality.** Most study participants interpreted their daughter’s emerging sexuality through a lens of adversarial gender relations. However, mothers relied on different sex education frameworks in order to teach their daughters how to avoid the negative physical and emotional consequences of sex. Although several mothers admitted privately that they wanted their daughters to abstain from premarital sex, only a few participants implemented (or planned to implement) an abstinence-only-until-marriage approach with their adolescent daughters.

Beverly, a single adoptive mother of one, was among the mothers in the study who endorsed this approach. Beverly's fifteen-year-old daughter was recently caught by school administrators "stealing a kiss" with a male classmate. To address what Beverly considered an inappropriate display of sexual behavior, she intended to use the *Passport2Purity* faith-based curriculum to facilitate a conversation with her daughter about sexual abstinence.

When I asked Beverly what she felt a Christian approach offered that a secular curriculum did not, she explained:

*The messages become just use birth control and just use a condom to protect yourself, and go out there and do what you want to do. And my feeling is that, for most of us who are women – I know I felt this way – the boys just want one thing. The boys will tell you they love you to get sex, so the girls will use sex to get love...and everybody's too immature, and somebody's bound to get hurt, and the ones who end up getting hurt the most are the girls. And they also have the most to lose in case they get pregnant, in case of decreased fertility [from STDs]. So what I'm trying to do is promote a message of wait, that abstinence is the way to go until marriage. That's the best way to go. For me, that's the Christian perspective.*

From Beverly's perspective, safer sex messages gave teenagers permission to "have sex" without consideration of the costs involved. Specifically, Beverly suggests that teen girls are more likely to suffer emotionally because girls' sexual decisions are based on idealized notions of love and romance. The appeal of the abstinence-only-until-marriage approach, then, is further supported by prevailing ideals of companionate marriage that emphasize love and emotional closeness. Waiting until marriage to have sex was one way that some mothers believed their daughters could access the emotional intimacy that women desire while avoiding the threats to their health and reputations that mothers associated with premarital sex. As Audrey, a married mother of two adolescent

daughters, remarked: “I want them to have the experience that somebody actually just really wants you for you and not because of what’s going on sexually or whatever.”

Similar to Beverly and Audrey, other mothers in the study spoke about the benefits of sexual abstinence, but many felt that waiting until marriage was simply unrealistic. Melanie, a married mother of one, shared this perspective: “I would say abstinence but given the numbers that we see that’s probably not gonna happen so I’m wanting to make sure that she’s well-educated and she knows what her options are.” Melanie further explained that ultimately she wanted her fourteen-year-old daughter to be prepared to successfully manage the hooking up and dating cultures on college campuses:

*I don’t want her to be as naïve as I was at that age. ...You just hear such horror stories about what’s going on from middle school onward in terms of what young girls are doing to fit in, to please boys and so that just really scares me. ...I think part of that will be her feeling confident about herself, having self esteem, making sure she realizes that she is to be valued.*

Melanie felt that due to the sexual silence that characterized her experience within her family-of-origin, she had not been prepared to navigate the “male-female dance” that happens on college campuses where men will “say anything” in order to have sex with women. For Melanie, lack of knowledge impeded college women’s ability to make informed decisions about sex.

In contrast, Elizabeth, a married mother of two, worried that because her fourteen-year-old daughter did not receive male attention in high school this would make her vulnerable to men’s sexual advances in college:

*She doesn’t have a lot of exposure to boys. There’s boys in high school, but they’re just friends, they’re not trying to date her - these are all white boys. They’re not trying to date her. So, she doesn’t have a lot of hot pursuit of boys trying to go after her, which worries me because I feel like when she gets to college, and then she starts getting – people start to*

*holler at her – she might be like ‘Oh!’ And, to me, you don’t want to wait to get to college to feel like I’m beautiful, [that] guys are interested in me. You don’t want to wait that long to feel that. First of all, it’s a good feeling. It makes you feel good and it’s a self-esteem builder, but it can be too much and you don’t know how to handle it. And then the first knucklehead who gets your nose open you can’t maybe assess the quality of it. ...Whereas if you’re used to getting male attention you don’t have to be all excited about it. You can be more discerning because it’s not a big deal, see what I’m saying? So, that’s the thing I worry about with her.*

Both Melanie and Elizabeth identify self-esteem as a protective factor against poor sexual decision-making. That is, in their estimation, college women with higher self-esteem are less likely to be impressed with the duplicitous tactics some college men use to initiate sex.

Elizabeth’s depiction of her daughter’s potential college dating experiences also revealed how age, race, class, and gender influenced mothers’ perceptions of their daughters’ sexual development. Elizabeth’s narrative suggests that the sexual desires of African American teenage girls coming-of-age in white communities might be repressed due to the small percentage of African American boys in their neighborhoods and schools. From this vantage point, college represents the first substantive opportunity for daughters to explore their (hetero)sexuality. The issue is that the gender beliefs that structure college heterosexual interactions tend to emphasize male dominance (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Mothers’ daughters then could easily become the targets of college men’s predatory attitudes and behaviors.

Yet reliance on a discourse of male sexual predation in mothers’ sexuality lessons presented additional challenges for African American middle-class mothers. Similar to many parents in the United States, in an effort to preserve teenage girls’ sexual integrity, mothers constructed teenage boys as “potential predators, abusers, and entrappers”

(Elliott, 2010, p. 207). However, because mothers' sexuality lessons assumed that daughters would be in same-race sexual partnerships in the future, adherence to this particular representation of masculinity meant that African American men were cast as potential sexual aggressors, thus reinforcing racial stereotypes about African American men. Ironically, mothers, including Elizabeth, strongly condemned these harmful depictions of black masculinity as part of the protective care work they enacted with their sons. As such, mothers' narratives exposed the tensions inherent in teaching daughters strategies to maintain their self-respect while also providing guidance on how to establish close relationships with men based on "mutual caring and respect."

**Respect and sexual respectability.** Self-respect, or "the honor that young women bestow upon themselves," (Garcia, 2012, p.27) was a recurrent theme in the sexuality lessons of mothers who assumed their daughters would have sex in college. Rather than promote sexual purity as the exclusive route to respectability mothers' sexual communications with their daughters, especially those already in college, emphasized the importance of sexual safety and selectivity. This approach is reflected in the socialization advice that Sonya, a married mother of two, gave to her twenty-year-old daughter: "Make sure you protect yourself. I wasn't coming from a standpoint that I didn't want you to have sex. I just was like: 'Don't come up pregnant. Don't come up with any sexual diseases.'" Sonya was clear that she did not believe that a woman's virginity status should be used as a barometer of sexual morality. Even so, Sonya was deeply concerned about promiscuity. Echoing Sonya's sentiment, Vera, a married mother of one, described the fears she had about her fourteen-year-old daughter's first sexual experiences:

*I just, as my husband put it, he doesn't want her to be turned out. I don't want her to go to college and get turned out. Sex is something to take*

*seriously...it's in a relationship. It's not just for the fun of it. I think I can get her through high school. My concern is college, so we do have those conversations. And my husband will say, 'Even nice boys want to have sex with you because that's what boys do.' He's like, 'You have to make good choices when it comes down to sex and safe sex and protecting yourself. And always [use] a condom.'*

Colloquially, to be “turned out” is to transition from sexual inexperience to sexual voraciousness on the basis of one or more sexual encounters. Mothers could accept that daughters might be sexually active in college but the majority of mothers did not approve of casual sexual relationships. As Vera stated: “It’s not just for the fun of it.” Of note, although mothers promoted certain tenets of sexual agency – namely the ability to make decisions about whether and when to have sex – in mothers’ representations of their daughters’ future sexual experiences these behaviors did not originate in daughters’ sexual feelings or desires. In fact, the topic of sexual pleasure remained mostly invisible in mothers’ sexuality lessons.

Mothers’ discomfort with casual sexual relationships was partially related to dominant perceptions of African American women as sexually promiscuous. Mothers therefore wanted to protect their teenage daughters from the internalization of such representations. Victoria, a married mother of three, explained:

*I feel like I have to protect my young men and women of color. Because they're always that [image] – we are already perceived as perpetrators, as hot sluts, as loose. And I don't want them to be entrapped by that narrative, and I don't want them to be acting from something that isn't real, is false. It really is a false depiction of this population, this group. And I don't want them to fall into that stereotype.*

In addition, having multiple sex partners had the ability to tarnish daughters’ reputations on campus. College was one of the few opportunities for daughters to cultivate a social network of future African American professionals. Thus, even though



mothers did not necessarily expect daughters to meet their husbands in college, mothers did expect them to behave in ways that communicated to their peers that they were “marriage material.” As such, for several mothers in the study, “dating was not about frivolousness.” As Alana told her fourteen-year-old daughter in a recent conversation about life after high school: “You date with a purpose, not just to be going through guys.”

**Beyond sex: Mothers’ attitudes on dating relationships.** The topic of dating relationships figured prominently in mothers’ narrative accounts. Although several mothers lamented the fact that the issue of healthy relationships did not receive equal attention in high school sex education programs, mothers differed in their approval of teen dating relationships. On the one hand, some mothers felt strongly that high school relationships distracted adolescent girls from more important endeavors. As Alana put it: “Dating isn’t a conversation; it’s not an option. You go to school to get an education.” On the other hand, there were study participants who approved of teen dating as an appropriate social activity for teens 16 and older.

Only a few mothers reported that their high-school-age daughters were in dating relationships, but emphasized that these relationships were closely monitored in an effort to prevent sexual experimentation. Given that mothers’ stances on teen dating were impacted by their concerns about sexual intimacy, I decided to ask if there were any intimate behaviors they felt were appropriate for their high-school-age daughters to explore. The vast majority of mothers identified “holding hands,” “hugging,” and “kissing on the cheek” as acceptable displays of affection. For older teenagers (aged 17-18), a few mothers stated that “kissing” and “heavy petting” (excluding genital contact)

would be “okay” with them. However, the message was clear: penetrative sex, and in particular vaginal and oral sex, should be reserved for adulthood.

Beyond discussions about teen sex, mothers’ sexuality lessons enumerated important qualities to look for in a romantic partner. Significantly, mothers reported that their daughters’ fathers often took the lead in teaching about healthy relationships.

Selena, a married mother of three, recounted the conversations she witnessed between her sixteen-year-old daughter and her daughter’s father:

*He is really good about talking about [relationships]. He’ll say things like, ‘You have to look at what a boy does. Don’t just listen to his words.’ He’s like, ‘Look at a man’s actions. If he says he’s going to be there, is he there? If he says he wants to do this, is he doing it? Does he have a goal? Does he have a dream? Does he show up when he says he’s gonna show up? How does he treat you? How does he make you feel? You look at what he does every single day.’*

As Selena and several other mothers explained, the purpose of these conversations was to give daughters the tools they needed in order to be discerning in their choices. Inevitably, mothers’ discussions about their daughters’ dating lives uncovered more than just their concerns about sexual respectability and the cultivation of healthy relationships.

Participants’ narratives also brought to the forefront the ways in which race, class, and gender influenced mothers’ perceptions and anxieties related to daughters’ prospects for marriage and motherhood.

### **Reproducing the Black Family: Race, Gender, and Heteronormativity**

**Getting a prom date: Race and gender politics in teen dating.** Mothers in this study identified prom as a school-based activity that was especially fraught for African American girls growing up in white suburban America. Most participants hoped their teenage daughters would attend their high school prom but felt it was unlikely to happen

if their daughters attended predominantly white schools. Elizabeth, a suburban married mother of two, explained:

*There's the black kid in a white school [issue] ...[but] there's these boys who are flooded by these white girls in high school, right? And then there's the black girls who can't get a date at their high school because the white boys aren't asking them out. And truth be told sometimes the black boys are not asking them out so then it's like, 'I'm a girl, I'm pretty, I'm fun. How come no one's asking me out?'*

The issue of social exclusion was a recurrent theme in the narrative accounts of mothers whose families resided in white suburban communities. Accordingly, mothers developed various strategies to ensure that their daughters could participate in the social rituals of contemporary adolescence. In particular, mothers used their connections to other African American middle-class mothers and their families to arrange prom dates for their daughters. Karen, a married mother of two, described how the process unfolded:

*We [mothers] want to make sure that none of our friends' daughters are left without a date for the prom. We want to make sure that if she wants to go to the prom that one of our boys will step up...it's important. And, now, having a daughter, I feel that strongly. And I know that all my girlfriends have my back. ...I can name at least five boys that I would call on to take my daughter to a prom.*

However, mothers' reliance on black social networks in order to temper the racialized gender relations that structured white suburban schools had its limitations. For example, Sonya, a married mother of two, took issue with what she perceived as a pattern in which African American girls asked African American boys to prom and not the other way around:

*How does that make you feel as a black girl, that you have to in essence beg a guy to take you to your prom, and you never get asked to a prom? Nobody valued you enough or finds you attractive enough to ask you to their prom. ...I think we need to think about that and we need to start talking to our boys about that because we put them in these situations because we want them to have these multicultural experiences...but we*

*don't think about all of the little...that's got to be a different feeling. I mean, to me, to be asked to be somebody's date, that's got to make you feel special. These girls aren't feeling special. And what are these black boys' moms saying to them? See, I don't think these boys are hearing about it.*

Although recent media stories indicate that some teenage girls flout tradition and ask their male peers to prom, when applied to their daughters' experiences, mothers in the present study did not see this as an act of girls' resistance to gender expectations. Rather, the phenomenon of "girls asking guys" or "girls going in groups" was not examined separate from the social context in which it occurred. Therefore, the violation of this specific gender norm was treated as further evidence of African American girls' devalued status as dating partners.

Elizabeth felt that raising a son and daughter provided her with a unique perspective: "I see both sides of it because I have a son, right? I have to say this – some of these moms of boys they don't get it. They're not as responsive as I would like for them to be when it comes to the black girls." When I asked Elizabeth to elaborate on this topic, her frustration was palpable:

*I really want to know why your son is taking this white girl to the prom when there's tons of black girls that are beautiful. You don't have to be in love with them. ...It's not that serious. But why is he choosing to take this white girl to the prom that he isn't in love with either – and might not even be his girlfriend – but he's making a choice. And the parents are saying, 'Well, I don't want to force him.' I get that. But this conversation should have been happening when he was 10, so that when he's 16, he's making a different choice. This is very hard for me because you know you don't want to sound like you're being too racial, but I want my son to marry a black woman. I do. That's important to me. I want my daughter to marry a black man. That is important to me. And I just feel like a lot of these moms of black boys are not encouraging them towards black women and black girls, and that really is bothersome to me – that bothers me.*

Elizabeth's emphasis on *choice* is significant. Choice implies the act of selecting between one or more options. The fact that African American girls "were right in their face" shaped the meaning Elizabeth attached to African American boys' decisions to take a white female classmate to prom. From Elizabeth's vantage point, the decision to attend prom with a white girl was a conscious rejection of African American girls.

Interestingly, mothers usually were blamed for their sons' prom date choices. African American boys' prom date decisions even led a few participants to openly question the effectiveness of other African American mothers' racial socialization practices. This is a curious finding given that the majority of married participants had African American spouses. Mothers did not appear to have the same expectations of African American fathers; that is, there was little discussion about the need for fathers to encourage their sons to date African American girls. Mothers' narratives also beg the question: why was prom so important? Mothers' prom-related concerns were not simply about arranging dates so that their daughters would be able to participate. Prom brought to light other issues that occupied mothers' thoughts about their daughter's future. In a way, prom foreshadowed some of the challenges that might await their daughters as adult women. Prom also required mothers and their husbands to confront their views on interracial relationships.

**Mothers' attitudes on interracial relationships.** Generally, participants in the study were approving of interracial relationships though mothers' acceptance took many forms. Some mothers were neutral or indifferent in their attitudes. As Gail, a married mother of two daughters, put it: "I don't really care. I think it's about whoever makes you happy." Marcia, for example, said she had "no issues at all" as there were several

interracial couples in her extended family. Although the few interracially married mothers in this study were supportive of interracial unions in the abstract, most did not expect white men to pursue their daughters as potential dating partners. In contrast, Maureen, who had never dated interracially, actively encouraged her fifteen-year-old daughter “to be open to dating interracially”:

*I’ve told her...we don’t choose our friends by race. Equally when we start talking to boyfriends I wanted to be able to say we don’t choose our boyfriends by race. We look for values and how they treat you and stuff like that. But it’s intentional. It’s intentional because it’s so unlike – my mother never said black or white. Everybody just assumed.*

According to Maureen, the other African American mothers and professional women in her social network roundly objected to her endorsement of interracial dating. However, Maureen felt strongly that African American women should not limit themselves to only dating African American men if men from other racial and ethnic backgrounds showed interest. For Maureen, it was important that messages about multiculturalism were consistent across relational contexts (i.e., friends, dating partners).

In fact, the balance between promoting a message of multiculturalism while simultaneously voicing a preference for intra-racial relationships proved to be quite challenging. Karen, a married mother of two, explained the tensions inherent in transmitting what often appeared to be a contradictory message:

*It’s walking a tight rope with that one because as an educated African American woman, and I believe socially conscious, politically left-of-center, I have to be very careful what I say to my kids...but I have to be honest also. And so what I do is I talk to my kids from a point of pride. It doesn’t come from bashing one race or the other. It comes in a pride of who you are...Are you making choices in terms of who you hang out with based on personality and friendship? Or do you have some deep hidden lack of satisfaction with who you are?*

In this way, Karen's perspective on interracial relationships was tied to concerns about internalized racism. Karen, for example, juxtaposed her childhood experience growing up in a black neighborhood with that of her children. She explained: "the kids I hung out with in my schools, they were black kids whose fathers were doctors and architects, so I was very proud of being a black person." At the same time, Karen wanted her children to have friends from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Even so, Karen remained resolute in her opposition. In explaining her objections, Karen opined:

*I kind of feel like we live in such a Eurocentric environment that our African heritage is going to die out. And by intermarrying into different cultures, that's what's going to happen. That's what's going to happen. And, so, for me, what I do is pump up my culture, and hope that that sticks without it being about anybody else or saying anything against anyone else. We're at a black church on Sunday. We're very active in our church. They're exposed to African American history. Their grandparents were very active in the Civil Rights Movement, so we're just trying to keep promoting that. And hoping it sticks.*

Evident in Karen's account is the perception – consistent with other research – that interracial relationships, especially those between black men and white women, "even if based on love, respect, and commitment, are viewed as detrimental to Black women, the Black family structure, and the survival of Black communities" (Chito Childs, 2005, p. 558). For instance, initially, in response to a question about interracial relationships, Audrey, a married mother of two adolescent daughters, said:

*I do not want my kids to marry...a white person, okay, I'm just going to be honest here. If they did, of course, I would still love them or whatever but I would really like them to marry somebody within their race if possible. If not, then anybody but a white person.*

Of note, although Audrey was initially firm in her view, she later appeared to equivocate:

*I guess if there's going to be a connection interracially I would like to see that it's a true connection. And then also you can stay black. Like then it's the black people who cross over, and then they act like they're not black*

*anymore, or don't know black people, or can't say hello to black people. I have a problem with those people. But if you can be you and be married to that white person then I don't have a problem with that.*

Audrey, a bit exasperated, then added:

*It [just] feels like as a black person...I feel like I always have to shift myself to make them comfortable with me. And I don't want my girls to feel like they have to do that.*

Nevertheless I eventually learned that there were interracial couples in Audrey's life whose unions she fully supported because she perceived a "true connection." But, for Audrey, these couples were the exception. From Audrey's perspective, the average interracial relationship merely reproduced the inequalities that mothers and their families had to negotiate in every other aspect of their lives. Maxine, a married mother of four, explained how she described this dynamic to her daughters:

*This is what we mess up in privilege as black folks. By putting these kids in these private schools they didn't have natural [relationships with black people]...because you can marry anybody you want. You can date anybody you want. There is something that your father and I have experienced that is precious about our both being black. We hope you can experience a non-translating relationship because you translate everywhere else you are.*

Here, Maxine uses the term "natural" to connote her view that within majority-black environments the development of romantic connections is an organic process. To Maxine, when African American families reside in white neighborhoods and are geographically dispersed throughout a particular region or state, intra-racial relationships are less likely to unfold effortlessly, and, instead, must be arranged or may not occur at all. Case in point: mothers' attempts to secure prom dates for their daughters.

In all, there are different ways to interpret mothers' narratives, especially when one considers the contradictions that mothers had to reconcile. On the surface, it appears



that for several mothers in the study their disapproval of interracial relationships was animated by negative attitudes about White Americans. This was evident in the stark terms that some mothers used to register their discontent. In addition, white men were the primary cause of mothers' concerns about their daughters dating interracially. Mothers rarely mentioned other groups of non-black men despite their presence in the social environments where mothers and their families spent much of their time. And yet, upon closer examination, when I considered mothers' attitudes on contemporary race relations as a whole, mothers' perspectives signaled an indictment of the social power associated with whiteness, and not of individual white people per se. It was participants' understandings of white racial power that made it unfathomable for several mothers to imagine a scenario in which their son or daughter could date or marry a white person without having their "blackness" discounted in favor of "whiteness." In this way, for many mothers, interracial relationships were symbolic of larger social structures that marginalize African Americans.

### **"I Don't Want to be Stuck in a Time that Doesn't Exist"**

Up to this point, I have examined the perspectives articulated by the majority of study participants. But there were voices of dissent within the study sample. In particular, these narratives illuminated some mothers' efforts to eschew or modify cultural scripts that place the collective prosperity of Black Americans on the individual sexual and reproductive choices of African American women. I also explore how mothers reacted when assumptions about their children's life course trajectories were challenged. In other words, these accounts show that socialization is a bidirectional process. The issues and

concerns that animated the lives of mothers' daughters and sons impacted mothers' protective care work and ultimately their experience of motherhood.

**Mothers' "sex positive" messages.** A small group of mothers reported that they tried to incorporate a message of "sex positivity" into their sexuality lessons with their daughters. Of note, mothers who held this view were more likely to have careers in the fields of education and behavioral health. Additionally, even though the majority of mothers who promoted "sex positivity" identified as Christian, they did not attend church regularly or were members of churches that openly critiqued conservative doctrinal interpretations of sex and gender relations. For example, Selena, a married mother of three, described how she integrated a "sex positive" message into her communications with her sixteen-year-old daughter:

*I never want [her] to feel like sex is bad, dirty, or dangerous. As a girl, I think that's even more important because like there's that like whole dirty part. ...My mother had like nicknames...for me, her nickname for the vulva area was 'stinky.' So, I already knew when I had a daughter we were not going to be calling it a 'stinky.' That's just out of the question. So, my friends and I actually talked about this and came up with the word 'yoni'<sup>14</sup>...so that's what we called it when she was little. I don't want her to feel anything negative about sex or her sexuality. It's a positive thing.*

Indeed, some mothers believed that sexual experimentation was integral to the development of a positive sexual self-concept. Gail, a married mother of two, gave her eighteen-year-old daughter the following advice before she dropped her off at college:

*I encouraged her to date. I don't think that you should have one boyfriend. I don't. I'm gonna be very upfront with you I go, 'You're not gonna [have sex with] everybody, but it's okay to date.' And I said, 'You have to find*

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<sup>14</sup> Roksana Badruddoja (2008) defines *yoni* as "a Sanskrit word meaning womb, vagina, and other physical and spiritual concepts to indicate woman-ness" (p. 57).

*out what works for you. What you like [sexually], and what you don't like.'*

Likewise, Pamela, a divorced mother of two, stated that she remained unconvinced that abstinence-until-marriage was a desirable standard. Pamela expounded:

*Well, their father was my only sexual relationship, and they know that. And I've kind of said to them that I don't necessarily want you to do it that way because I feel like it's okay to kind of explore, figure out who you are before you commit to somebody.*

Both Gail and Pamela believed that having dating relationships in emerging adulthood was an important part of the path to self-discovery and sexual satisfaction. Nonetheless mothers often struggled to have detailed conversations about sexual pleasure and desire.

Significantly, even among mothers who preferred that their daughters abstain from premarital sex or only have sex within the context of a long-term relationship, they, too, wanted to be able to speak with their daughters about sexual pleasure. Some mothers believed that it was important to talk to their daughters about masturbation (“self-pleasure”) and other non-penetrative intercourse activities, especially if they expected them to abstain until getting married in their late-twenties and early-thirties. Other mothers thought that teaching about sexual pleasure and women’s entitlement to it would help their daughters be able to effectively communicate their desires to their sexual partners or future husbands as well as help them identify signs of sexual coercion. However, Melanie spoke for many mothers in this study, when she said: “I can see where it’s important to do but I just can’t even imagine having that conversation. ...Let me know what you learn, if somebody has some good tips.”

Melanie’s interest in hearing the perspectives of other study participants is instructive. It suggests that parents, and in this case mothers, are often silent on this

particular sex-related issue because they do not feel adequately prepared to broach the subject. Mothers also were concerned about how the acknowledgement of sexual pleasure might undermine their delay messages. Furthermore, although unspoken in most mothers' narrations of their own experience, it is important to consider the race- and class-based meanings attached to sexual pleasure. Lisa Thompson (2009) has argued that, historically, African American women's sexual feelings and experiences have been the target of scorn and mockery. In turn, African American women have learned to remain silent about their sexual lives (Rose, 2003). For many African American mothers, sexuality-related conversations with their daughters – the persons to whom they are supposed to provide guidance - could be one of the few times they have spoken openly about sexual desire and pleasure.

**Interracial teen dating relationships: A “new” reality?** As previously noted, most mothers assumed that they would not need to talk with their daughters about interracial teen dating relationships. Thus, when daughters actually dated interracially – that is, when the issue hit very close to home - mothers' accounts revealed much more ambivalence than their stated preferences suggested. Evelyn, a married mother of two, described in great detail how she and her husband responded to her seventeen-year-old daughter's interracial relationship. According to Evelyn, she was taken by surprise because of her daughter's prior experience. Evelyn explained:

*I think she started to get a little complex. My daughter, I don't have a good picture of her, but I think she's very pretty for her age. She's tall, thin, nice hair, and she's very attractive, I think. But at this school there's not many black kids or black guys and like she said...they date either the white girls or you have to be mixed-looking, something like that.*

However, one summer her daughter entered into a relationship with a white adolescent male from a neighboring community. In discussing her initial shock, Evelyn noted: “You don’t really see that as much. Like you see the black guys wanting the white girls but you don’t see a lot of the white guys wanting a black girl.” Indeed, the lower prevalence of interracial relationships between black women and white men left Evelyn and her husband puzzled.

Evelyn also seemed personally torn about her daughter’s relationship: “I think we would prefer her to be with a black guy, I think. I don’t think my husband’s too keen on it.” Yet when I asked what her concerns were, Evelyn elaborated:

*One is definitely I just think of the way that the country is with racism and I just worry about someone doing something or saying something to her and him when they’re out together or treating them differently just because they’re a mixed couple.*

The significance of this concern cannot be overlooked. Research suggests that the threat of racial harassment in public places is part of the collective consciousness of African Americans (Lacy, 2007). To this end, Evelyn was especially worried about what might happen when her daughter spent time alone with her boyfriend in a white community with which she and her husband were unfamiliar. Adding to her concern was that race or “differences” did not seem to emerge as topics of conversation within her daughter’s relationship. Evelyn characterized her daughter’s boyfriend as “nice” and “very genuine” but “clueless” when it came to racial issues, which made her question his ability to understand certain racial realities, and, more specifically, to provide emotional support to her daughter if they were subjected to harassment. Interestingly, for Evelyn, this unexpected development in her seventeen-year-old daughter’s life not only caused her to

reflect on her attitudes on interracial relationships, but also changed how Evelyn talked to her younger daughter about race and teen dating relationships.

At times, mothers' socialization messages intimated that their predominantly white neighborhood context might prevent their adolescent daughters from growing up too fast. But mothers' perceptions about race and sexuality sometimes left them unaware of their daughter's emerging sexual feelings. For instance, Shirley, a divorced mother of four, reported that she felt blindsided when her seventeen-year-old daughter asked for birth control pills. Shirley did not expect her daughter to have a romantic relationship in high school because she attended a predominantly white school. Shirley therefore assumed that she could wait to broach the topic of "having sex" as part of her daughter's college send-off. As Shirley recounted the recent developments in her daughter's life, she offered the following reflection:

*I'm glad she's smart enough so you can still give the speech like, 'Well I'm not condoning or encouraging or saying it's okay.' She already knows that...she's a smart kid. ...I think she knew enough about sexuality...so I had to get her birth control pills. ...I don't think I thought I had to have it [the conversation] and then by the time that I would have she already seemed informed enough and already made the decision like, 'If I'm going to do this I need birth control pills.' That was smart of her in my opinion.*

The experiences Evelyn and Shirley had with their daughters defied their assumptions about the sexual preferences of white males. But such experiences also indicated that the increased interracial contact that characterized their daughters' social lives at times lessened taboos against and created opportunities for interracial intimacy. As such, both mothers' narratives suggest that some African American parents may face a "new" reality of interracial teen dating.

**Maternal sexuality lessons with LGB-identified children.** Participants' accounts revealed how mothers' perceptions of whiteness and affluence shaped their sexuality lessons. Several mothers believed that even though the good-girl/bad-girl dichotomy placed limits on the sexual agency of white middle-class teenage girls, their whiteness and class privilege offered them a kind of latitude in their expressions of sexuality that was unavailable to women of color. Moreover, because sexual modesty so often is tied to middle-class respectability, some mothers felt that their daughters had to demonstrate even more restraint since it takes more cultural maneuvering for African American women and girls to be perceived as sexually innocent. In turn, mothers tended to promote a strategy of sexual propriety and gender conformity to counter negative racial stereotypes, which often privileges procreative heterosexuality over other sexualities. Consequently, when mothers' children came out to them as lesbian, gay, or bisexual this discovery raised additional questions about how best to support their teenage children's development while also protecting them from the effects of racism, sexism, and homophobia on their well being.

In the entire sample, five mothers reported that one of their children identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Specifically, three mothers had daughters who were lesbian or bisexual. Whereas all mothers of LGB-identified daughters voiced their support of their daughter's sexual orientation, mothers did express concerns about gender nonconformity.

Pamela, a divorced mother of two, remarked:

*One of the things I've taken from my experience of being parented into my parenting experience is acceptance. I think it is very important that we accept our children as individuals. ...I have a hard time with how much she identifies with masculinity. If she was a lesbian and she wanted to go get her nails done and go shopping, I think I'd feel a little better. I think I'm aware that life as a black lesbian, you know, life isn't going to be easy*

*for her in a lot of ways. I think one of my first instincts is to protect her from that and I think my instinct preceding that was for her to know that I'm going to love you whatever it is and I'm going to support you and I want you to be who you are, and I want you to feel safe to be who you are even if nowhere else [than] in our home.*

Pamela's narrative revealed Pamela's fears about her daughter's physical safety.

Historically, African Americans "have embraced gender conformance as a way of attaining acceptance and status within the existing social order" (Williams, 2009, p. 836).

In Pamela's estimation, her daughter's ability to find pathways to success within the existing social order was not only a matter of social status, but also physical survival.

Shawn, a divorced mother of one, echoed Pamela's concern. As a gender nonconforming queer person, Shawn knew all too well the challenges that awaited Amari (Shawn's fifteen year-old daughter):

*I just had to have a conversation with her yesterday about the fact that your relationship is perhaps going to be more noticed. It's gonna get heavier surveillance. You're gonna attract more notice because you're black and gay and gender nonconforming. And it sucks, but that's life, and you need to be able to prepare for that and then protect yourself. So you cannot just be out here just like assuming that this is cool with everybody 'cause it's not. It sucks to have to have these conversations with my child, but I'm glad that I am able to have these conversations. I can teach her the lesson before it becomes threatening to her life, so that she doesn't become a Ranesha McBride - she doesn't become a Trayvon Martin, she doesn't become Eric Garner or Mike Brown, that that doesn't have to be in her future. And I guess the thing I need her to learn is you need to learn how to survive and thrive as a black gay woman in a society that is hell bent on killing you.*

Shawn's concerns were not unfounded. Recent research suggests that gender nonconformity prejudice and antigay prejudice often operate in tandem (Gordon & Meyer, 2008). In particular, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people of color are disproportionately represented among the victims and survivors of LGBTQ hate crimes (Marzullo & Libman, 2009). As well, embedded in Shawn's



narrative is the recognition that the progressive social contexts in which mothers' LGB-identified daughters - and non-LGBTQ children - were raised at times belied the persistent homophobia, stigma, and discrimination against LGBTQ persons that exists in the United States. Several mothers in the study reported that their children attended schools where LGBTQ students, parents, teachers, and administrators were a visible segment of the school population. In addition, increased visibility of LGBTQ persons in the media and support of LGBT rights left many mothers' adolescent children with the impression that being gay is "the norm," "no big deal," and a "settled issue." However, mothers of LGB-identified children did not always share their children's optimism. Pamela's and Shawn's protective care work therefore included teaching their daughters how to navigate a complex minefield of interlocking systems of oppression.

Given the various challenges that their daughters (and sons) were likely to encounter, mothers stated that above all the goal of their protective care work was to let their children know that they loved them. Specifically, heterosexual mothers of LGB-identified children sought to affirm their children's identities and express their openness to listen and learn from their children about how best to support them and the LGBTQ community more broadly. Victoria, a married mother of three, offered a poignant example of how mothers and their families reacted to one of their children coming out:

*One of the things that is clear to my kids, I think, is we love you for who you are. We want you to be happy. There are way too many people losing their lives to suicide because they're keeping secrets that they just don't feel like they can tell, share, voice. I would be devastated if one of my kids suicided because they didn't think they could come to me, or share with their dad, something they thought was an off limits topic. ...You have to be willing to have those conversations. They may be difficult conversations, but how do we get equality for all if some content is okay and other content isn't? So I think even in ways I might feel personally uncomfortable having different conversations, I challenge myself. I don't*

*want to be stuck in a time that doesn't exist. My children push me and force me to not be stuck in that time.*

Victoria's sentiment also reverberated in the narratives of a few mothers who did not have LGB-identified children. These mothers talked about "learning" and "growing" and "evolving" in their perspectives. Of note, they often credited their children's experiences for the shift in their attitudes. In the end, several mothers felt that the changing social landscape would require them to work alongside their children to develop "new and improved" resistance strategies that are responsive to this current social and political moment in American history.

## **Conclusion**

African American middle-class mothers' sexual socialization practices underscore Tricia Rose's (2003) assertion that sexuality "is intertwined with every facet of life and level of society" (p. 8). African American middle-class mothers make sense of their daughters' emerging sexuality within the context of broader social structures. At a basic level, African American middle-class mothers' "sex talks" with their daughters are meant to "inform and instruct [them] about norms, values, beliefs, and behavior concerning sexuality" (Barnes & Bynum, 2010a, p. 2). This includes exploring topics related to pubertal development, gender expectations, family dynamics, and intimate relationships. In the process, African American middle-class mothers, similar to many U.S. parents, draw on dominant, cultural, and religious notions of love, femininity and masculinity, and the perceived dangers of teen sexuality in order to generate their socialization advice. Yet African American middle-class mothers must undertake this specific parenting task against a backdrop of sexual stereotypes that propagate harmful beliefs about African American women. Indeed, African American middle-class mothers' sexuality-related

communications reveal the challenges that many African American mothers encounter in their efforts to foster resilience and resistance in their female children.

African American girls and women continue to be misrepresented, overlooked, and devalued in society, and perhaps more painfully, at times within their own communities. In turn, African American middle-class mothers are attentive to the various ways their daughters may receive the message that African American women are unlikable and undesirable as life partners. Of note, such concerns animate some mothers' perspectives on interracial relationships, as well as their tendency to endorse certain tenets of sexual conservatism. At the same time, African American middle-class mothers are not impervious to shifting societal attitudes on gender and sexuality. As is evident in the accounts presented here, some African American middle-class mothers have begun to question the primacy of resistance strategies that perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality and depend exclusively on the sexual integrity of African American women. In the end, mothers' sexuality lessons are a window into how African American middle-class mothers negotiate the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, as they seek justice for themselves, their families, and their communities.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

The purpose of this research project was to expand current knowledge about African American middle-class mothers. Traditionally, African American women's family lives have been examined through two lenses: one that emphasizes lower-income African American women's deviation from white middle-class constructions of 'proper motherhood' (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p. 267); and the other that describes a cultural ethos of motherhood in which African American women, with a community of "othermothers," effortlessly "combine child rearing, family, employment, and social activism" (Hill, 2005, p. 135). However, these two conceptual frames do not capture the full range of African American women's contemporary "mothering activities, identities, and experiences" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1192). With this study, I sought to add to the conversation on African American motherhood by examining the lived experiences of African American middle-class mothers, and the intersectional effects of race, class, and gender on mothers' socialization practices with their adolescent daughters. In the following sections, I offer a detailed discussion of the study results and implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

### Summary and Synthesis of Chapter Findings

Recently, scholars have worked to fill gaps in the literature on African American motherhood. In Chapter 4, I focus on how respondents negotiate ideological constructions of "good" motherhood. For example, Dawn Dow (2016a) introduced an alternative ideology, *integrated motherhood*, to describe the cultural expectations that African American mothers use to assess their work and family strategies. These include: (a) economic self-reliance, (b) work outside the home as the duty of "good mothers," and

(c) childcare assistance from family and community members (p. 188). Nearly all of the mothers in the present study worked outside the home at some point while they raised children. This finding corresponds with other studies that have found that African American professional women continue their employment after the transition to marriage and motherhood (Blair-Loy & DeHart, 2003; Dow, 2016a; Landry, 2000). Like Dawn Dow (2016a), I found that the decision to work outside the home was a “matter of course” and not a “choice” that middle-class African American mothers felt they needed to rationalize to others (p. 190). In fact, the opposite was true. The decision to transition from full-time to part-time work or stay-at-home motherhood frequently elicited confused reactions and disapproval from female relatives and community members.

For quite some time, feminist maternal theories have assumed that because African American women, regardless of social class and marital status, continue to work outside the home after having children that no differences exist among African American mothers in how they experience work and motherhood. Yet the data I collected indicate that this analysis has been incomplete. The perspectives and actions of mothers in this study were as complex as the world around them. Although respondents certainly found ways to pay homage to the mothering ideologies and cultural traditions that shaped their childhoods, their economic resources, types of employment, and residential locations created opportunities to enact domestic strategies that have been largely inaccessible to lower-income African American mothers and previous generations of African American women. These strategies included the ability to modify their careers and hire in-home caregivers. To this end, my findings are more in line with the results from Riché Daniel Barnes’ (2016) recent ethnography of African American career women in Atlanta. Unlike

the majority of Dow's (2016a) study participants, more than half of the mothers in my study had limited access to kin networks that could provide affordable, culturally affirming childcare.

Significantly, mothers' accounts suggest that educational and economic opportunities for upwardly mobile Black Americans often come with a loss of access to racially and culturally supportive environments. Karyn Lacy (2006) notes that in recent decades there has been an "emergence of distinctly black, middle-class suburban enclaves in the south and [M]idwest" (p. 911) that attract middle-class black families who want to "buffer their children from racism" (p. 910). However, these enclaves were few and far between in the Northeast region of the United States where I conducted my research. Instead, as mothers and their families became more affluent they were more likely to reside in predominantly white middle-class neighborhoods. Only through conscious effort did mothers and their families remain connected to a socioeconomically diverse group of Black Americans. As such, starting early on participants were actively engaged in mothering practices directed at confronting institutional and interpersonal bias. In Chapter 4, mothers did so by cultivating nurturing childrearing environments for their young children. But, as their children entered school, participants' accounts underlined how mothers' advocacy changed over time and was influenced by the unique schooling experiences of African American girls.

In general, the education management strategies explored in Chapter 5 most accurately reflect the experiences of mothers whose daughters attended predominantly white elementary and secondary schools. Still, nearly all of the mothers I interviewed drew on their cultural capital as college-trained professionals to facilitate the academic

success of their adolescent daughters. Among the small group of study participants who resided in majority-minority or racially diverse urban neighborhoods, most sent their children to charter, magnet, or public exam schools. Of note, mothers were confident in their ability to provide supplemental instruction to address any limitations in the school's curriculum. In this way, the juxtaposition of both groups of mothers in this study showed how cultural capital operates as a resource across the American education system.

However, even as mothers activated their cultural capital, some respondents encountered institutional challenges to their claims to a high-quality education for their daughters. On the one hand, mothers paid careful attention to teachers' expectations for their daughters' educational attainment and were prepared to intervene and challenge discriminatory attitudes and institutional practices. On the other hand, mothers had to prepare their daughters to confront discrimination on their own. Mothers did not assume that their class status would inculcate their daughters from racist encounters. Rather, mothers' class-based resources allowed them to exercise a level of control over their children's schooling that is rarely available to poor and working-class parents in general, and lower-income African American parents in particular.

As a study of mothering and motherhood, I also explored the socialization practices of African American middle-class mothers. In particular, in Chapter 6, I offer an intersectional analysis of mothers' socialization of adolescent daughters. Mothers' narrative accounts indicated that self-esteem was a primary focus of their mothering practices. Of note, living in a predominantly white social environment appeared to exacerbate mothers' concerns about the psychological effects of racial bias. Having a

positive self-concept, then, is what mothers believed would allow their daughters to persist in the face of adversity.

At the same time, most mothers agreed that being able to cope with oppressive structures was not the ultimate goal. It was not enough to learn how to fit into the existing social order. Rather, mothers wanted their daughters to be a part of broader community efforts to transform society. And yet the data also suggest that some of the resistance strategies that African American middle-class women are encouraged to implement might actually undermine their solidarity with lower-income African American women and limit their personal agency. African American middle-class women are expected to reject the aesthetics, attitudes, and actions associated with poor and working-class African American women (Collins, 2005). But African American middle-class women also are closely monitored within their communities for signs of internalized racism and emulation of middle-class white femininities. As a consequence, from the vantage point of many respondents, true liberation would not be achieved until all African American women are free to be themselves without apology.

Interestingly, mothers' desires to rewrite the rules and frustrate long-standing notions about how middle-class African American women should comport themselves in public did not extend to all domains of development. Daughters' emerging sexuality was a topic where mothers - including those respondents most critical of middle-class black femininities - promoted sexual modesty and restraint as a way to protect the self-esteem and reputations of high-school and college-age African American women. By examining mothers' sexual socialization approaches with their daughters in Chapter 7, I was able to examine how mothers negotiated racialized gender ideologies that construct middle-class



African American women as “responsible for setting the professional, aesthetic, political, moral, ethical, historical, and cultural values” of the African American community (Thompson, 2009, p. 4). In fact, mothers’ accounts offered empirical support to previous theoretical claims that “the performance of middle-class black womanhood relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes” of African American womanhood (Thompson, 2009, p. 2).

In the course of mothers’ lessons on sex, dating, and relationships, the intractability of the black-white color line came into full view. Mothers’ attitudes on family formation and reflections on their daughters’ prospects for marriage and motherhood explored the social, political, and cultural implications of interracial intimacy. For many mothers in the study, interracial relationships were understood to be one of the consequences of the structural integration and assimilation of Black Americans into mainstream society. Whereas a few mothers believed interracial relationships signified social progress in race relations, other mothers felt that interracial relationships represented a threat to the preservation of African American culture. As well, embedded in the narrative accounts of mothers in the latter group was an abiding sense that interracial relationships have an especially detrimental effect on college-educated African American professional women. Recent research does suggest that African American professional men are “the most likely to marry interracially” (Banks, 2011, p. 34). Thus, the perception among study participants that the pool of status-congruent partners is more limited for African American professional women was not entirely speculative.

Of note, a slightly different narrative emerged in discussions about interracial relationships between black women and white men. For instance, most mothers believed that white men do not view black women as desirable partners. As a result, the majority of mothers did not expect their daughters to receive attention from their white male peers in high school or college. In some ways, the limited opportunities for black women to date interracial appeared to exacerbate some mothers' indignation and disappointment at what they perceived as African American teenage boys' preference for white girls and girls with racially ambiguous phenotypic features. At the same time, mothers' accounts indicated that "white men are understood based on their privileged position within a social order that has oppressed Black Americans and other people of color" (Ward, 2000, p. 161). In turn, when mothers' daughters had white boyfriends, these relationships prompted mothers and their families to wrestle with difficult questions about power and privilege, integration and assimilation, and the collective impact of individual choices.

As is evident in mothers' narratives, the everyday experiences of participants' daughters and other children presented challenges to some mothers' assumptions about gender and its intersection with race and class. That is, mothers' children's lives offered them an opportunity to see the world through a different pair of eyes. As a result, some mothers reported that their views on issues such as interracial dating and homosexuality had evolved over time. But even when mothers' perspectives collided with the attitudes espoused by their teenage children - for example, several mothers reported that their daughters had far more progressive attitudes on same-sex sexuality than mothers and their husbands - most mothers reported encouraging their daughters to stand in their truth. Indeed, in the end, nearly all study participants remarked that watching their daughters

find their voice, remain steadfast in their beliefs, and overcome obstacles represented the greatest rewards of motherhood.

### **Study Implications**

This study draws on feminist conceptions of *work* that include the “‘invisible labour’ of the home and neighbourhood” (Reay, 2005, p. 104) that women and mothers perform on behalf of their families. In particular, this study examined middle-class African American mothers’ engagement in different forms of care work as they cultivated the next generation of middle-class African American women. The decision to frame mothers’ practices as *care work* allowed me to illuminate the considerable “affective, mental, social, and physical effort” (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p. 264) that middle-class African American mothers put forth to raise daughters prepared for life in the “real world.” By exploring how mothers organize family life, support their daughters’ educational achievement, facilitate their daughters’ identity development, and equip their daughters for adult womanhood, this study offers additional insight into the “societal and interpersonal factors” (Few, 1999, p. 71) that compel middle-class African American mothers to enact particular socialization strategies with their adolescent daughters. In turn, this study broadens our understanding of African American motherhood and family socialization practices among the “contemporary Black elite” (Barnes, 2016, p. ix).

Moreover, this study enriches academic conversations about race, class, and schooling in the United States. In Chapter 5, I adapt Golden and Erdreich’s (2014) theoretical construct - *educational care work* - to situate the educational achievement strategies of middle-class African American mothers within broader social structures of race, class, and gender. In particular, I bring to the forefront what happens when race

collides with dominant conceptions of middle-class mothering. That is, the mothers in the present study do what middle-class educational institutions expect all middle-class mothers to do: they “are deeply involved and intervene in schooling” (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p. 269). However, the issues that inform African American middle-class mothers’ involvement may differ from their white middle-class counterparts. For instance, the compensatory educational work performed by several mothers in this study focused on deficiencies in how schools approached discussions about African American students and African American culture. At the same time, middle-class African American mothers were not always afforded the same respect shown to other middle-class mothers in their interpersonal interactions with teachers and administrators. Quite simply, African American middle-class mothers did not fit the archetype of what a middle-class mother is in American society, and thus at times were treated with suspicion. While there is an impressive body of scholarship that examines parental involvement in schools as a gendered and classed experience, the impact of race on middle-class mothers’ strategic engagement in their children’s education has received less attention. The present study helps to fill this gap in the literature.

The intersection of race, class, and gender in the construction and negotiation of social identities was also evident in the socialization approaches mothers used with their adolescent daughters. According to Riché Daniel Barnes (2016) middle-class African American parents must assist their children in the production of class-specific racial identities that signal their connection to two social groups: Black Americans and White Americans. Barnes uses the term *strategic cultivation* to describe this class-linked racial socialization process. Specifically, middle-class Black American parents guide their

children in the negotiation of multiple social identities across different social environments, which includes instruction in the embodiment of “middle-class Blackness” (Barnes, 2016, p. 148). Whereas Barnes discussed middle-class African American mothers’ strategies for navigating raced and classed identities, this study extends previous research by examining the gender-specific strategies that African American middle-class mothers teach their daughters.

Indeed, mothers’ accounts reflect the lived experience of African American middle-class women within mainstream institutions. African American women and girls, like their African American male counterparts, must contend with racist stereotypes of Black Americans generally, as well as racial mythologies that specifically demean their identity and status as African American women. Correspondingly, African American middle-class mothers aim to provide their daughters with the tools needed to navigate their raced, classed, and gendered identities as middle-class African American female adolescents and young adult women in ways that resist pejorative images of African American womanhood. In this way, the present study explores the gender-specific meanings attached to middle-class racial identities. Participant interviews also revealed how the intergenerational transfer of resistance strategies from mothers to daughters proceeds over time as daughters become more autonomous.

The results from this study suggest recommendations for the development of supports for middle-class African American mothers and their families. First, mothers’ narrative accounts indicate that teachers and administrators would benefit from learning more about the socioeconomic and cultural diversity that exists within U.S. Black communities (Allen & Boyce, 2013; Eggleston & Miranda, 2009). In fact, respondent

interviews suggest that predominantly white public and private secondary schools - even those that purportedly celebrate racial and cultural diversity - have abdicated some of their responsibilities in the creation of inclusive school cultures. Far too often African American parents, and in this case African American mothers, serve as cultural experts and informal diversity consultants. To be sure, parental involvement in the classroom should be actively encouraged for all parents. This may include in-school presentations about the histories and cultures of different racial and ethnic groups. Still, mothers in this study described scenarios in which African American parents and other parents of color were disproportionately responsible for lecturing on and fielding questions about diversity-related issues.

In addition to mothers' concerns about instruction and school curricula, educators, administrators, and guidance counselors should be aware of the incredible pressures that middle-class African American students and their families may feel to achieve increasingly higher levels of success. Of note, school professionals need to understand that achievement pressure may come from not only individual expectations, but also the sense of obligation that many middle-class and upper-middle-class African Americans feel to achieve parity with White Americans as part of the collective struggle for racial equality. To this end, mothers' accounts highlighted the incredible amount of work that mothers and their spouses undertake in order to achieve favorable academic and developmental outcomes for their children. In particular, the majority of African American middle-class mothers' care work was hidden from public view and only a topic of conversation with other middle-class African American mothers. As such, school-based efforts to promote diversity and inclusion should use an intersectional approach to

examine the nuanced ways in which social inequality shapes the experiences and identities of parents and their children. This could include explicit discussions about the role of allies in alleviating some of the burden that African American parents and other parents of color carry to tackle systemic issues that affect their children's schooling experiences.

Finally, mothers' sexuality-related communications with their adolescent daughters suggest that mothers and their families might benefit from community-based programs that focus on gender and sexuality. The vast majority of mothers' daughters received comprehensive sex education in school while mothers (and their husbands) provided sexuality-related lessons within their homes. However, participant interviews indicated that mothers, as part of their sexuality lessons, tried to account for the distinct challenges that African American women confront in relation to their sexual subjectivity. Race- and class-based gender strategies that advocate gender conformity and sexual modesty as a salve to the persistent sexual stereotyping of African American women have a long history within U.S. Black communities. And yet these messages often contradicted mothers' gendered racial identity lessons about individuality and empowerment. It might be useful, then, to create spaces where African American parents can explore these issues openly, without fear that doing so will confirm racist myths about black sexuality. This may include helping mothers strategize ways to approach communications with their daughters about sexual pleasure, as mothers identified this topic as especially fraught. As well, several mothers noted that they felt unprepared to address their daughter's questions about non-binary gender identities and same-sex sexualities. Often times these topics were presented as part of their daughters' sex education curriculum, but parents need to

be supported in their efforts to answer such questions. One approach is to increase access to information on the identities and experiences of LGBTQ persons, with an emphasis on the histories and social realities of LGBTQ people of color who may be invisible in mainstream sex education curricula and conventional discussions about African American youth and their families.

### **Future Directions**

As I have alluded to throughout this discussion chapter, socialization is not a unidirectional process (Elliott, 2010). Daughters are not passive recipients of their mothers' socialization advice. However, in the present study, I could not determine how daughters interpreted their mothers' messages. Prior research suggests that daughters do hear their mothers' socialization messages as intended (Thomas & King, 2007), but more research is needed to better understand how mothers influence their daughters' constructions of age-based middle-class black femininities and what meanings daughters attach to their social position as middle-class young African American women. Results from this study suggest that research on African American middle-class mothers that includes their adolescent daughters would enhance conceptual frameworks of the socialization process within African American families.

Another line of future research could focus on dimensions of mothering and motherhood that were not closely examined in this project. Many of the married mothers in this study talked – albeit in limited detail – about their husbands not only as intimate partners and best friends, but also as co-parents. For instance, mothers' narrative accounts indicated that fathers were often recruited in mothers' efforts to nurture their daughters' self-esteem and in discussions about dating and relationships. Exploring the co-parenting



relationship within middle-class African American married-couple families would expand current knowledge about the impact of spouses on the mothering strategies that African American middle-class mothers employ with their adolescent daughters. As an extension of the present study, it also might be useful to explore the network ties of African American middle-class mothers in greater depth. In particular, such research could examine how African American women's social support and peer networks shape the construction and negotiation of mothering ideologies, identities, and practices among today's African American middle-class mothers.

This study demonstrates the import of using Black feminist and intersectional theoretical approaches in family studies research on African American women and their families. By applying an intersectional lens to the study of contemporary motherhood, I was able to examine how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender is negotiated between and within groups of mothers in the United States. In particular, this study suggests that African American middle-class mothers experience motherhood in ways similar to and different from middle-class White American mothers and lower-income African American mothers. By centering the voices of African American middle-class mothers I show the complexity in African American women's experiences of mothering and motherhood. In addition, an intersectional lens allowed me to situate mothers' perspectives and strategies within broader sociocultural and historical processes. In this way, mothers' individual accounts can be used to expand knowledge about how forms of inequality operate simultaneously and independently to produce different life course trajectories. Such a theoretical approach, then, invites researchers to heed the calls made by critical race and feminist family scholars to address gaps in the research on African

American families by acknowledging and exploring the economic, cultural, ethnic, sexual, and gender diversity that exists within U.S. Black communities.

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## Appendix A: Participant Characteristics

*Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms and Demographic Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Degree	Marital status	Children	Sex of children	Age of daughter(s)	Family income
Jackie	31	Professor	Master's	Never married	3	F, M	13	\$25,001-50,000
Tamara	45	Sales	Bachelor's	Married	3	F, M	20	More than \$100,001
Cynthia	40	Teacher	Master's	Married	2	F	14	More than \$100,001
Victoria	50	Psychologist	PhD	Married	3	F, M	16	More than \$100,001
Delores	41	Human Resources Manager	Master's	Married	4	F, M	20	More than \$100,001
Phyllis	59	Attorney	JD	Never married	2	F	16	More than \$100,001
Vanessa	63	Administrative Assistant	Master's	Married	1	F	21	More than \$100,001
Selena	50	Psychologist	PhD	Married	3	F, M	16	More than \$100,001
Shawn	40	Professor	PhD	Divorced	1	F	15	\$50,001-75,000
Tiera	40	Healthcare Practitioner	Master's	Never married	2	F, M	17	More than \$100,001
Maureen	55	Human Resources Manager	Bachelor's	Divorced	1	F	14	More than \$100,001
Kristen	46	Attorney	JD	Married	3	F	16, 14	More than \$100,001
Patricia	50	Financial Specialist	Bachelor's	Married	2	F, M	17	More than \$100,001
Sonya	57	Financial Analyst	MBA	Married	2	F, M	19	More than \$100,001
Shirley	45	Government Official	JD	Divorced	4	F, M	17, 13	More than \$100,001
Melanie	58	Higher Education	Master's	Married	1	F	13	More than \$100,001
Denise	38	Teacher	Master's	Married	2	F, M	18	More than \$100,001
Pamela	41	Social Service	Master's	Divorced	2	F	12	\$75,001-100,000
April	44	Unemployed	Master's	Married	2	F, M	14	More than \$100,001
Nicole	36	Social Service	Master's	Married	1	F	13	More than \$100,001
Vera	55	Attorney	JD	Married	1	F	16	More than \$100,001
Audrey	45	Homemaker	Master's	Married	2	F	15, 12	More than \$100,001
Evelyn	45	Compliance	Master's	Married	2	F	17, 14	More than \$100,001
Karen	52	Entertainment	Master's	Married	2	F, M	12	More than \$100,001
Fallon	51	Human Services	Master's	Married	2	F, M	14	More than \$100,001
Nancy	53	Social Service	Master's	Married	2	F, M	14	More than \$100,001
Gail	42	Education Administrator	Master's	Married	2	F	18	More than \$100,001
Beverly	60	Human Resources Manager	JD	Divorced	1	F	15	More than \$100,001
Mona	42	Attorney	JD	Married	4	F	16, 13	More than \$100,001
Maxine	56	Entertainment	Master's	Married	4	F, M	16	More than \$100,001
Myra	56	Manager	Master's	Separated	3	F, M	20	\$50,001-75,000
Laura	NR	Education Administrator	Master's	Never married	1	F	17	More than \$100,001
Alana	44	Nonprofit Management	Master's	Separated	2	F	14, 12	More than \$100,001
Elizabeth	46	Human Resources Manager	Bachelor's	Married	2	F, M	17	More than \$100,001
Marcia	45	Marketing Analyst	Master's	Married	2	F, M	14	More than \$100,001
Cherise	50	Attorney	JD	Married	2	F, M	15	More than \$100,001

*Note.* N= 36 participants. NR = no response. F = female. M = male.

**Appendix B: Demographic Intake Form**

1. How do you primarily refer to your racial/ethnic background when asked?

- ☐ African American
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Bi/Multiracial
- ☐ Other, please explain:

2. What is your age?

3. How many children do you have?

*Please use the space below to list the biological sex (male/female) and age for each child you have.*

4. Was your mother born in the United States? ☐ Yes ☐ No

*a. If no, what is your mother's country of birth?*

5. Was your father born in the United States? ☐ Yes ☐ No

*a. If no, what is your father's country of birth?*

6. Where were you raised (city, state)?

7. Where is your current primary residence (city, state)?

8. What is the name of your neighborhood (if applicable)?

9. Do you belong to a particular religion or faith tradition? ☐ Yes ☐ No

*a. If yes, which one(s)?*

10. What is your highest level of education completed? *(Please check all that apply)*

- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctorate
- ☐ Advanced professional degree (JD, LLB, MD)

11. What college did you attend for your BA/BS degree?

12. Do you work outside the home? ☐ Yes ☐ No

*a. If yes, what is your occupation?*

*b. How long have you worked at your current position?*

13. What is your current relationship status?

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Living with partner in committed relationship
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed

14. If sharing a household with your current partner/spouse, how long have you lived together?

*a. What is your partner's/spouse's occupation?*

15. Please mark the figure that best represents **your** annual income (from all sources).

- ☐ Less than \$25,000
- ☐ Between \$25,001 and \$50,000
- ☐ Between \$50,001 and \$75,000
- ☐ Between \$75,001 and \$100,000
- ☐ \$100,001 or more

16. Please mark the figure that best represents your annual **household** income (from all sources).

- ☐ Less than \$25,000
- ☐ Between \$25,001 and \$50,000
- ☐ Between \$50,001 and \$75,000
- ☐ Between \$75,001 and \$100,000
- ☐ \$100,001 or more

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### Background [Life History Questions]

\*Could you tell me about your childhood and where you grew up? *Probe:* What was the racial composition of your childhood neighborhood?

\*What are some life lessons you received growing up that stood out to you? *Probe:* Do you remember talking about race growing up and what it meant to be a Black/African American woman?

### *Schooling and Work Experiences*

\*Could you tell me about what school was like for you growing up? **If applicable:** Were there any race-related incidents in school that stand out to you? Can you give me an example?

\*What did you do after high school?

\*How would you describe your college experience?

\*What did you do after college?

\*What have your experiences been as a Black/African American woman in your career field? *Probes:* Have you felt that you've been able to connect with good mentors? **If, no, ask:** what have the barriers been? Have you felt that your contributions at work have been recognized? Have you ever felt that you were mistreated in the workplace because of your race and gender? Could you give me an example? What has your response been to mistreatment in the workplace?

### Motherhood [Ideologies, Experiences, Activities, Identities]

**Biological:** How did you feel when you found out that you were going to be a mother? How did other people respond to the news of your pregnancy?

**Adoptive:** How did you (and your partner) come to the decision to adopt? How did other people respond to the news that you (and your partner) were going to adopt?

\*How did your life change when you became a mother? *Probes:* Did you consider staying at home with your children? What was the discussion like with your spouse/partner/co-parent/family about staying at home or going [back] to work?

\*Who did you turn to for support? *Probes:* Does/did the racial/ethnic composition of these support groups make a difference to you? **If applicable, ask:** When did you join [insert name] organization? What informed your interest (or decision to join)? How would you characterize your experience thus far?

\*What resources have you found most useful and least useful while raising your children/daughter(s)?

\*How would you compare your approach to parenting with how you were raised?

\*Could you tell me about how you (and your husband/partner/spouse) came to the decision about where to live and where to send your child(ren)/(daughter(s)) to school? *Probe:* How did the racial/ethnic composition of the neighborhood(s) and school(s) figure into your decision?

\*How would you describe what motherhood has been like for you? What are some of the challenges and rewards of motherhood? *Probe:* Are there particular pressures you feel as

a Black/African American woman raising a daughter? How have you coped with these pressures?

### **Raising Daughters [Socialization Practices]**

\*Could you tell me about how your relationship with your daughter has changed over time?

\*Can you tell me about your daughter's early school experiences? How did her experiences change over time? *Probes:* Have there been times when you've had to advocate for your daughter because you felt that she was being treated unfairly? Can you give me an example?

### *Sexual Development and Relationships*

\*How have you talked to your daughter about sexual development? *Probes:* How did you approach puberty? How was your approach similar to/different from your experience growing up?

\*Have you had conversations with your daughter about body image? *Probes:* What has prompted these conversations? What decisions were made about your daughter's hair? What about your daughter's clothing? How have these decisions changed over time?

\*Has your daughter received sexuality education in school? *Probe:* What are your thoughts about the school's approach to this issue?

\*How have you/How would you approached/approach discussions about sex? *Probes:* Have these conversations been spontaneous or in response to a particular incident? Can you give me an example?

\*When you've talked to your daughter about sex – have these conversations only focused on forms of sexual contact that may lead to pregnancy? *Probe:* Have you discussed oral or anal sex?

\* What are your thoughts about talking to teenage girls about contraception? *Probes:* Have you talked to your daughter about contraception? What forms of contraception have you discussed/would you consider discussing? What are your thoughts about putting teenage girls on the pill or long-term contraception?

\*Have you discussed other sexuality-related topics such as same-sex attraction? *Probe:* How have you approached/How would you approach these conversations?

\*Are there issues that you feel less comfortable discussing or feel that schools should not discuss?

\*Are there intimate behaviors that you are comfortable with teens experimenting with? *Probes:* Hugging? Kissing? Sexual touching?

\*Have you talked to your daughter about sexual coercion?

\*What have your conversations been like regarding intimate relationships? *Probes:* Are there specific conversations you've had about black male-female relationships? What are your thoughts about interracial dating and marriage? Does your position differ based on the gender of the your child? How does your daughter's sexual orientation impact your thoughts about dating, sex, and relationships?

\*Are there sexuality-related issues where your daughter's perspective differs from your own?

*Broader Themes about Raising African American Girls*

\*There's a lot of discussion about the conversations African American parents must have with their sons, especially as it relates to interactions with law enforcement, what do you see as the critical conversations that African Americans parents must have with their daughters?

\*What are your thoughts about media images of African American women/girls? *Probe:* Are there images that you feel are positive?

\*What are your hopes for your daughter's future? What are your fears for your daughter's future?

**Contemporary Issues**

\*How do you feel about teens and social media? *Probe:* Do you have specific rules about social media usage?

\*What are your thoughts about contemporary race relations?

\*What are your thoughts about how the U.S. is changing and what it will mean for your daughter's generation of women?

**Concluding Thoughts**

\*I know that we have covered a lot during this interview, before we end, is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to address?

\*Do you know anyone else who might consider participating?



### **Appendix D: Recruitment Email**

Re: Participants Needed for a Research Study on African American Mothers

Dear [Organization Liaison]:

My name is Brandyn-Dior McKinley and I am an African American female PhD student at the University of Connecticut (UConn). I am looking for individuals to participate in my dissertation research study on African American mothers who are raising adolescent daughters.

I am recruiting women who:

- 1) Identify as Black or African American;
- 2) Hold a bachelor's degree or higher; and
- 3) Are currently raising a daughter aged 12 to 21.

Recent research on the experiences of African American middle-class mothers is limited, so I am conducting interviews to learn more about African American women's perspectives on motherhood and preparing daughters for adulthood.

Participation involves a 1-2 hour face-to-face or telephone interview. Interviews will be held at a time and location convenient for the participant.

Participation is voluntary and confidential. No personal identifiers will be used and all participants will be given pseudonyms in reports of the findings. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time.

If you would be willing to share this information with your members or would like additional details about the study, please contact me via email at [brandyn.mckinley@uconn.edu](mailto:brandyn.mckinley@uconn.edu), or by phone at \_\_\_\_\_. This research has been approved by the UConn Institutional Review Board, Protocol #H14-164. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Brandyn-Dior McKinley, Student Researcher  
University of Connecticut, Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Marysol Asencio, Principal Investigator  
University of Connecticut, Department of Human Development and Family Studies

## Appendix E: Consent Form

### Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study



**Principal Investigator:** Marysol Asencio

**Student Researcher:** Brandyn-Dior McKinley

**Study Title:** African American Mothers and the Socialization of Daughters

#### Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study about the motherhood experiences of African American women who are raising daughters. You are being asked to participate because you have indicated that you:

- Identify as Black or African American;
- Have completed a bachelor's degree or higher; and
- Are currently raising a daughter aged 12-21.

The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need in order to decide whether to participate in the study. I encourage you to ask questions now and at any time in the future.

#### Why is this study being done?

The goal of this research is to better understand how African American women experience motherhood, and how mothers' experiences may be influenced by raising a daughter. Recent research on the experiences of African American mothers is limited, so I am conducting interviews to learn more about African American women's perspectives on motherhood and preparing daughters for adulthood including any challenges mothers anticipate facing along the way.

#### What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, interview questions will focus on your life growing up, your experiences as a mother, and your views on contemporary social issues such as race, gender, dating and relationships. You do not have to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

The interview will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. You will be asked to complete a brief demographic intake form that includes questions about you, your current household, and your family background. You will not be asked to provide your name or any other personal identification on the form.

The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. I will use a digital audio recorder to record the interview with your permission and I may also take notes. You are free to pause or stop the recording at any time during the interview. You can also refuse to be audio-recorded and I will take notes instead.

Once I have reviewed your interview transcript, I may contact you for a brief follow up interview. The purpose of the follow up interview is to give you an opportunity to further clarify your responses or tell me anything that you were not able to talk about during the initial interview. If you do not wish to be contacted again you can let me know now, or when you are contacted for a follow up interview. However, choosing not to participate in a follow up interview does not affect your ability to participate in the study.

Please indicate whether you agree to be contacted for a follow up interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

### What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

There are minimal risks associated with this research study. You may be asked questions about your life experiences that expose unexplored feelings or aspects of your relationship with your daughter and your family that have not been explored prior to the interview. However, you do not have to talk about anything that you do not feel comfortable discussing. Your participation is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time. A possible inconvenience associated with your participation may be the time it takes to complete the demographic intake form and interview.

### What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research, but you will have an opportunity to share your perspectives and discuss issues that may be important to you. We hope that your participation will expand researchers' knowledge about African American women's family lives as well as their experiences as mothers and parents of daughters.

### Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs and you will not be paid to participate in this study.

### How will my personal information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your data. With your permission I will record the interview with a digital audio recorder. After the interview, I will upload the digital audio file to a password protected computer and delete the file from the digital recorder. The uploaded file will be used to create a transcript of the interview. Your transcript will be labeled with an identification number. This identification number will not contain personal identifiers. In addition, I will replace any names that you mention during the interview with pseudonyms in the transcription.

The consent forms, demographic intake forms and transcriptions will be stored in a secure location. A master key that links names, contact information, and identification numbers will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed at the end of the study. Only the principal investigator and student researcher will have access to this material.

Any computer hosting transcripts from the interviews will have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the principal investigator and student researcher will have access to these materials. At the conclusion of this study, the student researcher intends to publish the findings. You will not be personally identified in any publications or presentations of this research by name.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality, especially if you discuss your participation with others.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Research Compliance Services may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

### Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. Furthermore, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

### Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, (Marysol Asencio, 860-486-4177) or the student researcher

(Brandyn-Dior McKinley, 248-765-1649). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.

**Documentation of Consent:**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person  
Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name:


\_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

## Appendix F: Institutional Review Board Approval



**DATE:** June 25, 2014

**TO:** Marysol Asencio, DrPH  
Brandyn-Dior McKinley, Student Investigator  
HDFS, Unit 1058

**FROM:** Jaci L. VanHeest, Ph.D.   
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
FWA# 00007125

**RE:** Protocol #H14-164: "Negotiating Motherhood and Intersecting Inequalities: A Qualitative Study of African American Mothers and the Socialization of Adolescent Daughters"  
*Please refer to the Protocol# in all future correspondence with the IRB.*  
Funding Source: Unfunded  
**Approval Period: From: June 25, 2014 Valid Through: June 25, 2015**  
"Expiration Date"

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this protocol on June 25, 2014. The research presents no more than minimal risk to human subjects and qualifies for expedited approval under category #7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. Enclosed is the validated consent form, which is valid through June 25, 2015. **A copy of the approved, validated consent form (with the IRB's stamp) must be used to consent each subject.**

All investigators at the University of Connecticut are responsible for complying with the attached IRB "Responsibilities of Research Investigators."

**Re-approval:** It is the investigator's responsibility to apply for re-approval of ongoing research at **least once yearly**, or more often if specified by the IRB. The Re-approval/Completion Form (IRB-2) and other applicable re-approval materials must be submitted **one month** prior to the expiration date noted above.

**Modifications:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, the investigators, or funding source, please submit the changes in writing to the IRB using the Amendment Review Form (IRB-3). All modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB **prior to initiation**.

Office of the Vice President for Research  
**Research Compliance Services**  
438 WHITNEY ROAD EXTENSION UNIT 1246  
STORRS, CT 06269-1246  
PHONE 860.486.8802  
FAX 860.486.1044  
compliance@uconn.edu

*An Equal Opportunity Employer*

Audit: All protocols approved by the IRB may be audited by the Post Approval Monitor.

*Please keep this letter with your copy of the approved protocol.*

Attachments:

1. Validated Consent Form
2. Validated Recruitment Material
3. Validated Appendix A
4. Validated IRB-1
5. "Responsibilities of Research Investigators"